

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

M A G A Z I N E

DECEMBER 1995

THE WINK

The dead guy had
one eye open and
one closed. He had
a face like a squirrel
and blue lips.

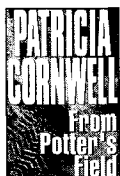
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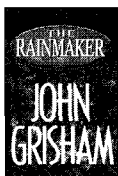
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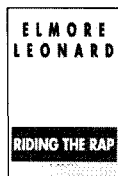
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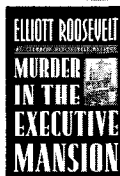


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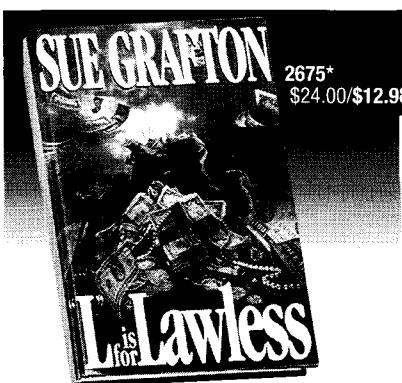
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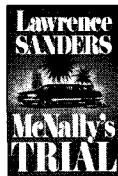
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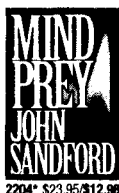
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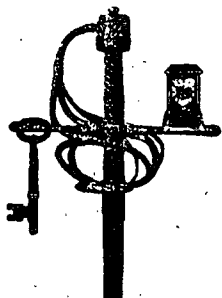
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Tricks and treats abound in the stories that follow, along with a couple of witches, poisoned apples, and a Mystery Classic we thought appropriate to the season. Well, maybe only one witch; Angela Zeman's Mrs. Risk is an enigmatic figure. But the combined efforts of Ms. Zeman, Jas. R. Petrin, Judith L. Post, and Gene KoKayKo, who brings us a new story about Rubekowski and his big yellow Labrador Buddy (remember "Late September Dogs" in the Mid-December 1993 issue?), enable us to present our annual Halloween issue in style. Even the nonseasonal stories—Carol Cail's "Sinkhole," D. H. Reddall's "Enigma," and Bill Crenshaw's "Miner Operation"—have a hand in it, filled as they are

with a touch of madness, a handful of magicians, and a dollop of the macabre.

We are pleased, by the way, to welcome back Carol Cail, who has been away from AHMM's pages for fifteen years. (The two stories she wrote for us were "Dead Weight" in 1978 and "Blood from a Turnip" in 1980.) Not that she hasn't been busy. In addition to short stories published elsewhere, more than fifty poems, some articles, and a monthly cookbook review column, she has written five novels. HarperPaperbacks brought out her first mystery novel, *Private Lies*, in 1993; *Unsafe Keeping* is just out from St. Martin's in hardcover.

"Sinkhole," we predict, will surprise you.

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Side A) "The Black Cat" 9-18-47 (30 min.)
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Tape #7 - Murder by Experts

Side A) "Dig Your Own Grave" 8-15-49 (30 min.)
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FICTION

THE WINK

Jas. R. Petrin

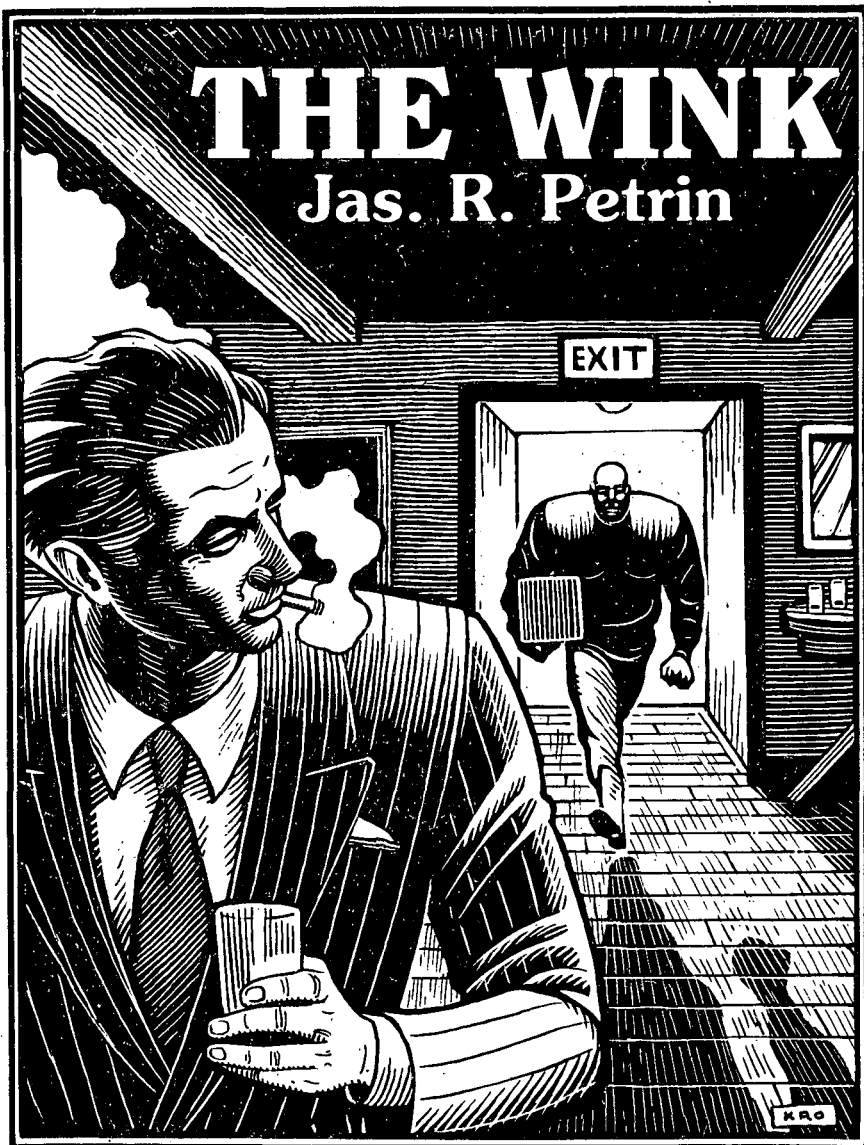


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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The way it all starts, it's Halloween day and I'm sitting in the beverage room of Donny Rumano's place, which is to say the Brookside Hotel, and I'm expecting the appearance of Henton, who has called me about a pressing problem he wishes to discuss. Then suddenly who do I see strolling in my direction but Jimmy Quicks, an unsavory West End individual, looking very forlorn and long-in-the-face and standing out like a forklift in a chapel on account of he's carrying a microwave oven under his arm. I glance away fast at the VLT machines, but not fast enough; and a moment later Jimmy is seated across from me, his oven is occupying the chair between us, and he's eyeing my two glasses of draft beer as if he hasn't seen anything of a similar description since he falls off the wagon thirty years ago.

I push a glass towards him.

"Jimmy," I say, "how's tricks?"

The happiness that briefly lights his face is suddenly gone. His jowls droop ruefully over the suds.

"Tricks are not good," he informs me. "In fact, they are not good at all."

Jimmy Quicks does not follow the height of fashion, wearing a jacket like a tarpaulin, a

pair of greasy green strides, and big brown boots with feet in them the size of pork roasts. He is a hulk of a man who moves at all times like he's towing an aircraft carrier. If he owns a razor, he is saving it for a special occasion because his lantern jaw has got bristles prickling out of it like an iron-worker's brush. I don't care how tricks are with him, but it's hard to know what to say to Jimmy Quicks at any time, leave alone when he sits down uninvited and places a large kitchen appliance in your vicinity.

"What's the problem?" I ask.

Another thing I don't want to know.

He rests his hand on the oven.

"This item here," he says, ignoring my question and giving the box a thump with his knuckles in case I haven't noticed it yet, "what do you figure it's worth?"

I take a glance at it.

"Well, Jimmy," I say, "I guess a guy could get a hundred for it, if it didn't have that dent in the side, or maybe eighty, if it didn't have that scratch, but the way it sits now, with whatever else I see here—that scrape on the door—I'd have to say fifty, and no more."

"Sold," he says, shoving out a mitt for the cash.

Gently I inform him that I don't need a microwave, that I've never felt any desire to possess a microwave, and that I let Elsie in the Kitchen Nook back of the beer vendor here at the Brookside attend to any microwaving needs on my behalf; and when I think he's totally understood this line of reasoning, and bought into it, only then do I ask how he comes to be carrying a piece of culinary machinery such as an oven around the town with him in the first place.

"It's a very sad story," he says.

I suggest that perhaps it could be sadder, that the item could be a refrigerator.

"I wouldn't mind if it was a refrigerator," Jimmy Quicks replies with a dismal look. "At least then I could put beer in it. If I had any."

And his story tumbles out.

It seems his troubles begin when he volunteers to help out an old pal from a time way back when they're both guests at the Headingly Correctional Center, this previous acquaintance appearing out of the woodwork in the wee hours, the way acquaintances of this sort will do, offering Jimmy a few bucks to help him move his sick auntie's furniture from one place to another.

I nod and say to myself, oh yes, thinking I see right off where this leads.

Jimmy is not so suspicious, however. And besides, he needs the cash. So he takes off with this individual, who goes by the name of Joe Funk, and they arrive at an apartment where there is no shortage of furniture of the very best kind. Here Joe Funk points out a truck that is parked down below on the street, and asks Jimmy if he can fiddle the locks somehow on account of he has forgotten his keys at home, and says for Jimmy to begin with the microwave while he, Joe, goes to visit the men's room. After that, he says, he will be glad to help Jimmy remove the sofa and the rest of the items, tote them down to the truck, and deliver them to the new address.

So Jimmy takes the microwave downstairs and puts it in the truck very easily, since forgotten keys are no problem for Jimmy. This takes maybe three or four minutes. He then goes back upstairs to the apartment, ready for the sofa or whatever else Joe Funk wishes to move next, but for some strange reason Joe Funk is no longer anywhere to be found in the place.

Now, as already mentioned, Jimmy is slow. To be truthful, Jimmy is also not very bright. In fact, Jimmy is the type of

guy who will light the fuse of the space shuttle with no more than a long wooden match if you pay his bar bill for him. But outside of this he's not without certain qualities, being an exceptionally strong individual, for one thing, and very single-minded for another, and when Joe Funk doesn't put in an appearance, Jimmy keeps at it like the workhorse he is, muscling the sofa out of the apartment and down the stairs and loading it into the truck with no help from anyone whatsoever, though he tells me it's a pretty fair weight for a sofa and the final heave just about whacks him out.

In fact, as strong as he is, moving the sofa takes so much out of him that Jimmy believes he'll rest up and wait for Joe to return, and hopefully get some much-needed help with the rest of the items. But after sitting around for some time and finding that still there is no Joe, Jimmy's patience runs out. He hot-wires the truck and goes looking for him.

He drives to a street the name of which he thinks he heard Joe Funk mumble, but he's disappointed to find that there is no apartment building anywhere along that stretch of roadway, not even a hole in the ground where such an apartment building used to be. He

discovers, in fact, no private dwelling places there of any kind whatsoever, but only a lumberyard, a wastepaper depot, and a whole lot of wrecked cars turning brown behind a barbed wire fence.

Now Jimmy begins to get irritable. He has expended a considerable amount of physical labor, and it begins to appear he will receive no remuneration for it. So off he goes to the Brookside and starts lugging the microwave oven from table to table, trying to sell the thing.

"On account of," Jimmy Quicks says earnestly, "I got a right to be paid for the work I done, right?"

I can't disagree. But I point out that maybe the oven isn't the best item to be hustling in lieu of a paycheck, what with the condition it's in, and this and that; but Jimmy says it beats carrying a sofa in and out of hotels, particularly *this* sofa, which weighs, he assures me, something upwards of nine hundred pounds.

Now this chance meeting with Jimmy occurs soon after eleven o'clock in the morning, and it's some time later when I run into Henton, who very nearly apologizes, claiming that he can in no way be blamed for missing our appointment on account of at

some time very early in the day his apartment is robbed. Furthermore, Henton says, it's only when arriving home from a card game, long after the sun is in the sky, that he discovers this fact.

He wonders why I don't ask what was stolen from him.

I say I can probably guess.

He tells me there's no way in the world I can guess.

I say to him, "A microwave oven with a scratch and a dent in it, and a sofa that weighs nine hundred pounds."

Henton closes his eyes and opens them as if I've performed a wizardly trick, and admits that indeed he has lost those very items, except that the oven was almost brand new and the sofa was not near as heavy as that. So then I mention Jimmy Quicks. I retell Jimmy's story just the way Jimmy told it to me, and by the time I get finished, Henton's eyes are open so wide that his blue corduroy Rams cap is in danger of falling off the back of his head, and he climbs up on both feet.

"Call the cops!" he says.

I try to calm him down.

"Call them!" he hollers.

"Henton," I say, "you don't mean that. They'll want proof that the items belong to you, that they're your very own personal property, and that you

came by them honestly in the first place." And I tell him that I myself have no doubt of his personal claim to ownership, but I ask him if he's sure he can prove all this.

Henton says that he most certainly can prove this, every bit of it, except maybe for some very minor parts of the argument, such as the bit at the start, the stretch in the middle, and maybe the end.

So I tell him I can't speak for the authorities, but since he makes this claim, and stands by it, I'll tell him where to find Jimmy Quicks so that he can reclaim his property any way he thinks best.

And I am about to do this. But all of a sudden Henton isn't so hot on the idea, and says to me, on second thought that maybe it's no good.

"What's no good?"

"This notion of yours. I mean, I can't just waltz over to Jimmy's place and cart that stuff in broad daylight."

"Why not?"

"I might be seen."

"So what? It's your property."

His eyes flicker. "No. What I'm trying to say is, if a rumor like this was to hit the street—that a guy of my description has been robbed of some personal items—well, then I will be in danger of losing face. My reputation will suffer. In fact, I

may well be the laughing stock."

Of course, this is all quite true. Henton is the sort of individual to whom situations of this type and sort are not supposed to occur; in fact, with individuals of his description the situation is most often the reverse.

"Well, then," I say, "suppose you let on that you loaned out the items temporarily and are now simply taking them back. Or spread it around that they are out for repairs." But seeing that Henton doesn't think too much of these ideas, I do some quick lateral thinking, saying, "No, I guess not." And then I change the subject, asking, "What about this pressing problem you originally wanted to discuss?"

"Oh," Henton says, "that's another thing entirely. That concerns a number of my card-playing friends." And he heaves a large sigh and explains. "What it is, there's an opinion among these guys at the present moment that I don't play exactly fair with them. That I leave a game before the cards have properly cooled off, and that when I leave I am always ahead."

"Is this true?"

"That I am ahead when I leave? Yes. But the cards are cool, so the charge is false."

"Then . . ."

"One of the guys is a very sore loser. He is a sore loser here and in Montreal, and in Detroit. He is such a sore loser in those cities that certain individuals there have offered large sums if someone will put his mind at rest, as well as the rest of him. But no one collects these large sums as of yet because he is an unpleasant guy."

"And your problem?"

"The guy's name is Sam Gates. He's a lousy cardplayer. He's a guy who should never pick up a hand. So to make peace with him I would have to deliberately throw a game, which is distasteful to me because it would be like a heavy-weight throwing a fight—very unprofessional."

"Then don't do it."

"I don't intend to. But Sam Gates is insistent. He demands satisfaction. And I know that he is the kind of guy who will *get* satisfaction, that being the way that he is."

"Hmm," I say, "I'll have to think more about this. And in the meantime I'll think of a way to get your furniture back to you without embarrassment."

"Fine. But you don't have a truck," Henton points out. "And neither do I, as you very well know."

These are true facts. Naturally I think of Jimmy Quicks' truck, but I remember Jimmy telling me that if he gets no buyers for them, he will take the furniture items back to his place and then ditch the truck, on account of he doesn't want the authorities to find it in his possession and think that he is a dishonest individual.

So we mull things over till I come up with another idea.

"There's a guy not far from here," I say, "who goes by the name of Yelp Lauder. And this guy Yelp owns a truck with which he does small moving jobs for various persons, usually at night, and it just so happens that Yelp Lauder owes me, and so there's a good chance he will help us out if I ask him. He and I could return the items to your apartment while you're out, and you will be able to say you know nothing about it."

Henton brightens.

"It might cost something, though," I add.

"What?"

"It might cost something. A little mopus, a bit of rhino—some cash."

He sours again.

"But you said this guy owes you."

"He owes me a favor. I don't say that he owes me any cabbage, and there is likely to be

some serious out-of-pocket entering in. Gasoline, and like that. And then there's Jimmy Quicks. He'll have to be paid for the work he did, right?"

Now Henton takes this last point very badly indeed. In fact, he takes it so badly that he begins to raise his voice at me.

"Do you expect me to pay the freight on the burglary of my very own place?"

I see I have touched a wound, so I shrug and explain it like this: "Henton," I tell him, "try to look at it this way. You say that your luck at cards has been not too bad lately."

He admits that he did, and it has.

"Then," I say, "what you must do is accept this as the cost of doing business. A sort of business expenditure as the businessmen say."

Henton sits there a minute with his face puckered up like he's got a digestive problem, and at last gives his head a slow, sad shake.

"I'll pay Yelp but not Jimmy," he says firmly. And then he asks, "How much will it cost?"

So I give Yelp a call, and Yelp is agreeable and shows up at the Brookside, and I climb into the truck with him and off we go to see Jimmy. As we drive along, Yelp tells me something about his bad back, and from

this I suspect that he intends to avoid any heavy lifting he doesn't like the looks of, but I can do nothing about this. And when we reach the home of Jimmy Quicks, which is a small knockdown place behind the old biscuit factory on Notre Dame Avenue, it turns out that I do perform most of the wheezing and grunting because Jimmy, being very sullen and surly after learning that Henton will not in any way compensate him for his physical labors, makes it known that his hip has gone bum.

"Which hip?" I ask him.

"Either one," he says.

So I wind up doing the hard work, and it practically kills me, but finally the sofa is stowed in the truck, and the microwave also, and Yelp and I say goodbye to Jimmy and ferry these two items across town to Henton's place where I boost them practically all by myself up four flights of stairs. I'm exhausted. I slip Yelp some cash and head home. It's beginning to get dark. Already there are people in Halloween costumes moving here and there in the streets.

I'm scarcely in the door when my telephone rings. It's Henton, and he speaks to me sharply:

"I just got home."

"Congratulations," I say.

"And I see that the sofa and the oven are back."

"You are perceptive," I say.

"And I find there's a dead guy in my sofa."

I'm about to suggest that he needn't bother conveying so much thankfulness and gratitude towards me when all of a sudden this fact that he mentions breaks through.

"A dead guy?"

"That's right."

"On your sofa?"

"In my sofa."

He is particular on this point.

"You don't mean *on* it?"

"If he was *on* my sofa," Henton says, "I would tell you so. But he's *in* my sofa, and I want him out of it. I also want him out of my apartment, and out of my life, and since I'm sure you're the party that brought him here, I want you to come back and perform this relocation in person, understand?"

"But, Henton," I say, "all I did was deliver the sofa. I didn't put a body inside it, or check to see if there *was* a body inside it, and Jimmy didn't tell me that *he* put a body inside it, so what can I tell you about this?"

"Get Jimmy over here, too."

Now Henton is a very good friend of mine. In fact, I have known Henton for a great many years, and I would never say anything against him. But

in all the time I know Henton, I'm aware that it does not take a very big key to wind him up, and I'm aware also that he carries a large howitzer under his coat.

So I give Jimmy a ring, tell him his presence is required, and back to Henton's I go.

Along the way, I consider the facts. I figure Henton can't be referring to the sofa I delivered but must be referring to some other sofa. He is confused, I decide. But when I walk back into his apartment and take a look at the thing for myself, I see that it is in fact the very same sofa that I previously almost single-handedly delivered here, only now it does look very different.

What I don't realize when I'm muscling this sofa is that it's one of those daybed-type sofas that can be folded flat out for sleeping, and it has a compartment inside it in which to store bedding and such things. I notice this now because Henton has it flung wide open. I can look in and see the compartment. I can also see the dead guy lying inside it. It is easy to tell that he's dead since he is stretched out the way a dead guy will often stretch himself out in a coffin, with his hands on his breast and his hair neatly combed, although I can see that he's not as neat as a

guy in a coffin because his shirttails aren't tucked in and there's a large red stain on his chest.

I remember the weight of this sofa, and I feel a sharp twinge in my back. But in spite of this, the guy in the sofa is quite small. He has one eye open and one eye closed, and he's got a face like a squirrel and blue lips.

"Who is he?" I ask.

"You tell me," Henton says.

"Don't you know?"

"That's not the question. The question is, what can you tell me about him?"

"Well," I say, "I've never seen him before." And then I say, "What will we do with him?"

"You can tell me that also while you're at it because he isn't welcome here. I don't care for this individual. I don't care to be blamed by the authorities for the condition he's in. And another thing I don't care for," Henton says, "is the way he keeps winking at me."

The dead man does appear to be winking, and to please Henton, I step forward and gently draw the sprung eyelid down over his glassy red-rimmed orb. But it's no good. The eyelid drifts back up again.

Henton snorts. "There's something else, too," he says. "How does my microwave get all bunged up?"

He is looking at me very suspiciously, but coming in cold like this on a dead guy, I don't have too many thoughts about microwave ovens, although I do remember that this particular oven is bunged up to a high degree the moment I first lay eyes on it in the bar of the Brookside Hotel at eleven o'clock in the morning under the arm of Jimmy Quicks, and I also remember that I have previously informed Henton of this fact, and I remind him of this now.

"So maybe," I add reasonably, "it got dropped in the initial removal."

"Removal?" he snaps. "That's what you call it?"

"It's only a thought."

"Right," Henton says. "Well, here is another thought for you." And he leads me to the bathroom and draws back the shower curtain, and there on the inside of the bathtub are two very large bootprints with a cross-ribbed sole pattern. And then Henton shows me a wide, deep chip knocked out of the white porcelain toilet tank, and a hole in the wall.

"I don't know what other thoughts you have," Henton says, "but I guess you will think this burglar stands in my bathtub to try it for size and see if it is worth burgling. He finally decides he will steal my toilet tank, but then damages it, and

since it's no longer a negotiable item on the toilet tank market, he reinstalls it and cinches it back down onto the pipes nice and neat before he leaves, yes?"

I don't know what my thoughts are any more. I'm all confused. But at this moment I'm saved by a ring at the door, which makes Henton jump as if he's been shanked and dart back into the living room and slam the sofa lid down hard with a bang. Then he motions for me to go see who it is, and I discover that it's only Jimmy Quicks, and Jimmy strolls in looking very unhappy, and casting his eyes this way and that.

"This place," he says, "looks quite familiar."

"It ought to," Henton snaps, "since you robbed it just this morning."

"I did?" Jimmy seems suddenly impressed with himself.

"Yes, you did. And I want you to tell me where your buddy got to."

"Which buddy?"

"Your buddy from the slammer. The one with the auntie in the burgling business. He lost something down the back of this sofa, something nasty which I'd like to return to him, but in order to do that, I have to locate him. So where," Henton asks, "can I find him?"

Now this is a question Jimmy has asked himself any number of times that day, going over and over it in his mind compulsively, since he too has a small matter to discuss with Joe Funk, namely his wages for services rendered. And searching his brain, which is not a big job, he recalls something. He remembers Joe Funk's yawning and saying he is beat from spending all night at a card game, and when Jimmy asks how he makes out at that game, Joe Funk becomes very irate and says, "Not good."

"Well," I say, grinning brightly at Henton, "small world. He's at a card game, you're at a card game. He takes a sofa, you lose a sofa." I peer at him quizzically. "Are you sure the two of you are not acquainted?"

"What are you getting at?" Henton asks in a sharp way.

"Nothing." I am remembering Henton's howitzer. "Only it looks like the burglary and the card game are related. So if you can remember who all was at the game, and what transpired there, you might figure out who took your sofa in the first place, and in the second place, how this dead guy comes to be stashed in it."

Jimmy is staring at us blankly. "What dead guy?"

Henton motions to me, and I throw open the sofa so Jimmy can peer in.

"Oh," Jimmy says, scratching his chin stubble, "you mean this dead guy?" As if there is no end of dead guys in this place. And then he takes a closer look, and suddenly his face goes red. "Well, Jeez," he says. "This is him!"

Now it's my turn. "This is who?"

"This is Joe. My old buddy. The guy you're looking for. Joe Funk."

Well, at this revelation I am speechless. But Henton is not. He is far from it.

"Right," he says. "I thought you might say that. The fact is, I know him, too. But the name that I know him by is Sam Gates."

Well, this is great food for thought. And we all stand around pondering facts for a while, and not getting too far, when finally I say:

"So he had an alias. That's good. It may help us solve this mystery. Since we have two names for this guy, and both of you knew him, maybe one of you can think of someone who might have wanted to kill him."

"Everybody wanted to kill him," Henton says as if this is a common belief. And Jimmy nods.

"I mean somebody," I say patiently, "with a clear motive. You, for example."

"Me?" Henton replies. "Are you serious?"

"Certainly I am. After all, this guy robs you of your personal items, and now he's dead, tucked inside your sofa. These will likely be considered suspicious circumstances by the authorities, in my personal experience."

"Who else," Henton grumbles, "might have done it?"

"Well, there's Jimmy, of course. Jimmy," I say, turning to look at him, "admits he's the last one to see Joe Funk alive. And his motive could be that Joe doesn't pay him."

Now there is a very long silence in the room, and both these hard-nosed guys are gazing very suspiciously at me, and they no longer appear to be entirely friendly at all, and suddenly Henton jabs his finger my way.

"Just a second here. You could have done it. You're the one that brought him here, after all. You're the one that handled him and hauled him up the stairs."

"But I don't have a motive."

"No? How do we know that? I bet we could think of one. I bet the cops could come up with a motive for you if they put their minds to it."

I have to admit that the cops around here have been known to jump to some interesting conclusions before this time, not always in my favor, and I see right away that not one of us is safe.

"Well," I say, "then we're back to my first idea, aren't we? The card game. We must take it from there."

"Yes, the card game," Henton says. And he wanders to the window and stands there alone, staring at the reflections of the lamplight in the glass.

The next thing I know, Henton is shaking me. I open my eyes and find myself slumped in a chair. I see that Jimmy has nodded off in another chair, and Joe Funk is still stretched out in the sofa, completely at rest except for one eye being open. Henton is excited. He tells me that he has given the matter of the card game some serious consideration, and that he has worked out a few possibilities and drawn one or two conclusions.

"Like what?" I want to know.

"Like who might have killed Sam—Joe—this guy in my sofa."

"And who might that be?"

"Somebody at the game. Somebody who doesn't like him. Somebody who leaves early, right after Joe does,

when Joe comes here to relieve me of my personal items."

"And who is that?"

"You will see," Henton says. "First I must make sure of my facts."

And Henton then says we will go to the card game, which is a nightly event whenever players are available, and players are always available since this is a club which has legitimate members on all points of the compass, except that tonight being Halloween many of the guys will be at the Brookside Hotel where Donny Rumanoff offers a costume contest with many twelve-packs of beer as prizes to be given out. But Henton says it is still worth a shot.

And he says that we will take Joe along. We will take him, he says, because he does not know what else to do with him, and he is worried about the effect Joe's presence is likely to have upon the sofa if he remains boxed inside it very much longer.

So we pull on our coats and go down to Henton's car, Jimmy Quicks bringing Joe along in a fireman's carry over his shoulders. I'm worried about slinging Joe around so openly, but as we are exiting from the elevator, we encounter a crowd of kiddies all got up in Halloween masks and cos-

tumes, and one of them, a little Frankenstein, says to us, pointing at Joe:

"What's *he* s'posed to be?"

"He's supposed to be dead," Henton answers, and the kiddies say, "Wow, cool!" and go on their way.

So we load Joe into the car and head off to the card game. And the location where this card game takes place is a location I'm in no way familiar with, although it's a location in a neighborhood which isn't strange to me, being in the West End on William Avenue, not far from the Brookside Hotel. It's an apartment on the second level of a four-plex and, Henton explains, is under a name not connected with an actual individual, the rent being paid from a cut of the pots that change hands.

The members have keys.

Henton gets his out.

"Us two'll go up first and get the door open," he tells me. "Jimmy, you bring Joe along after us."

So Jimmy gets stuck carrying Joe again, but this is really no problem for a guy as large as Jimmy, in spite of his bum hip, now that Joe is no longer wearing a sofa overcoat, and me and Henton go on ahead. As we are about to go up the stairs, Henton stops and points to a patch of wet pave-

ment, and there on it is a large bootmark with a cross-ribbed pattern.

Entering the apartment, we are in a short hallway. There is a bathroom to our right, and to our left is a living room. The place is very dusty and very dirty in every way, and has a disagreeable smell to it, such as I often notice in places which have no women in them. Also there's a shortage of furniture, the only items of that description being a beat-up chrome table in the living room with a cluster of battered chairs around it.

And these chairs are not empty. Seated here are three men: a small tough-looking guy in sweats and medium-sized bright white running shoes; a chubby, smiling guy with dimples and two chins, wearing small black oxfords; and a large take-charge kind of character with a big snout on him who is well turned out in a white shirt and striped braces and who has his sleeves rolled up but whose feet are hidden from me by the table. These men are drinking vodka and orange juice and are gazing very suspiciously at us, and the large one says softly in a nastylike tone:

"What the hell is this, Henton? We run a closed game. You know it."

Henton replies that he is totally aware of this fact but says that he has felt for some time that the game is in need of new players, and that he believes this to be the correct moment to introduce a few.

"Why is that?" the large guy asks.

"Because," Henton says, "we may *need* new players soon. And also it's Halloween." And in a ghoulish-type voice, he adds, "It's the best time for fresh blood." Then he motions for me and Jimmy Quicks to sit down at the table with him, which we do.

So here's Henton sitting at one end of the table, and Jimmy Quicks and me sitting to the left and right of him. The large guy with the snout is at the opposite end from Henton, and the chubby guy and tough-looking guy are sitting next to me and Jimmy Quicks. I don't have a clue where Joe Funk is at.

"So what have you been up to?" Henton asks the large guy, dropping a wink.

"None of your business," the large guy replies. And it's plain to see that all is not well between Henton and him.

"The other night," the large guy says, "you complain about this and that. And now you complain about this and that. There seems to be no pleasing

you, Henton, even though the last time you're at this table you win fifty-two out of sixty-one hands, at the end of which Lloyd here is down seven hundred skins, and Hightops is down a thousand. Isn't this right?"

Henton has picked up a deck of cards from the table and is efficiently shuffling them with crisp, snappy sounds and no flair, which is the true mark of a practiced player. He is smirking to himself the whole time the large guy is speaking, and when the large guy is done speaking, Henton tips his head to one side and says to him, still smiling:

"I notice you don't mention Sam Gates at all. Sam was down also, I remember, and was extremely unhappy about it. In fact, he is so unhappy he gets up and leaves us when the evening is still young. Isn't *that* right?"

"What do I care about Sam Gates?"

"Not much, I think," says Henton, "but I thought you might remember since you leave here so soon after him."

Now the large guy doesn't seem to know what to say to this at first, and his eyes go on looking this way and that, this way and that all around the room, until it seems he finds the words he is looking for writ-

ten on the wall over Henton's head.

"What about you? What do you do in all these games? The same as always. You rake in your cabbage and walk out on us."

Henton's teeth are very white, I notice.

"I've been thinking about that. And it may be that I did leave too early a few times. But not to worry. I am offering a chance to get even. I will play you guys as long as you want tonight. I will play you, Lloyd; and you, Hightops, and I will even play you also, Eagle Beak. Of course, Sam was the biggest loser, but I don't see him here so he will have to wait."

From all this naming of names I am suddenly aware that we are sitting with none other than Eagle Beak Benson, who has the reputation of being an extremely no-nonsense individual both in this city and around the Detroit area. And I further realize that the other two are none other than La-La Lloyd Laduc, who is the double-chinned guy, and Tommy Hightops, who is the tough-looking individual in the bright white rubber-soled schooners.

These are all very serious individuals indeed, and not the guys to be cutting cute with at any time, which is what Henton appears to be doing; and I

wonder why, if Henton wishes to leave this world early, he thinks that Jimmy Quicks and I want to leave early with him.

"I'm not playing tonight," Eagle Beak growls.

"Oh yes," Henton says, "I forgot. You already told us that. You don't play on Halloween. Halloween upsets you. You won't play cards here tonight, and you won't go to Donny Rumano's costume party and beer evening at the Brookside. I believe you're too superstitious, Eagle Beak. I think that it will be the ruin of you."

Before Eagle Beak can reply to this, a tremendous thundering at the door breaks loose all of a sudden, clearly a sizable pack of kiddies out there, all pounding with their fists and hollering, "Trick-or-treat! Trick-or-treat!" at the top of their lungs. But nobody gets up to answer the door, and so the kiddies move on up the hall to the next apartment and recommence their din and clamor there.

Henton says, "Well, now, this is interesting. I see we don't even get up to answer the door tonight. Aren't you carrying things a bit too far, Eagle Beak?"

"Mind your own business," Eagle Beak shoots back.

"But it is my business," Henton continues. "This is not the

Halloween spirit. This is not how things should be. Weren't we all kiddies ourselves not long ago?"

"I never was no kiddie," Hightops says gruffly, and looking at him, anyone could believe it.

"Besides," La-La Lloyd puts in, as if he has a bullet-proof argument in a room full of blanks, "we got nothing to give out. So that's that."

"What do you mean? We've got dollars, haven't we?" And with this Henton brings out a handful of bills and tosses them in with the bills that are piled on the table. "There," he says, "that's enough to take care of things."

Well, at this sudden act of Henton's, La-La Lloyd and Hightops lean forward to object most strenuously, but again we are interrupted by a riot at the door, and Henton gets up out of his chair this time to open it.

"Leave it be," Eagle Beak whispers, and he brings out a large howitzer and trains it on Henton. "Leave it be," he says again softly, "and sit down and mind your business."

But Henton does not sit down. Henton stays put. And personally I don't much like this development since Henton, as I've said, packs a howitzer of his own, and if there's one thing I figure to be most disagree-

able, it's being caught in the vicinity of two unfriendly howitzers.

Now the kiddies are hammering away like Disney's dwarves outside the room, and with a curt shrug at Eagle Beak and his howitzer, Henton reaches out and pulls the door open.

A mob of weird faces is suddenly looking at us, and there are monsters, devils, witches, and ghouls, in fact all of the customary Halloween entities; and Henton laughs and counts heads, and loses count, and counts again, and finally comes back to the table and scoops up a mittful of cash. The door is standing open, and I wonder if this is a good time to beat it, but I see that Eagle Beak Benson has stowed the gun away and is sitting there rigid in his tight red braces with beads of sweat squeezing out of his brow and trickling down. He is as pale as a boiled potato. In fact, he is as pale as a steamed potato. I see that he is terrified of these costumed kiddies, and I wonder how this is possible, Eagle Beak Benson being one of the most terrifying guys himself who ever shoves his big snout through a door.

When Henton has distributed some dollars and this batch of kiddies leaves, all very happy indeed, Eagle Beak pro-

duces the gun again and says loudly in a voice which is meant to sound threatening but which I notice is not quite so steady this time:

"I told you not to do that!"

"Well," Henton says grinning, "I thought I couldn't of heard you right. The trick-or-treaters will be calling all evening, so we'll *have* to keep on opening the door and letting them in, and opening the door and letting them in, and—"

Another clamor breaks out.

"You see?" Henton says. And in spite of the howitzer pointing straight at the tongue of his belt buckle, he steps over and springs the door again.

This new group is very bold. They barge right into the room. They swarm around us hollering, "Trick-or-treat! Trick-or-treat!," and there are vampires and mummies and werewolves and demons of every description, and I glance at Eagle Beak to see how he is taking it, and I notice that he is staring with a petrified look at a small individual who appears to be decked out like a corpse, having a white sheet around his neck, dark X's painted over his eyes, and a dark catsup bloodstain daubed splat on his front. In fact he looks very much like Joe Funk.

Right then Eagle Beak bolts from the room.

The kiddies are all cheering and hurrying, and Henton is stuffing their sacks with dollar bills, and La-La Lloyd and Hightops are blinking their eyes, and Jimmy looks baffled, and I myself am totally perplexed, having no idea what is going to happen next, when suddenly there is a blood-chilling shriek from the bathroom and, moments later, a muffled shot.

Well, the kiddies all rush out of the apartment with loud squawks, and it is clearly the very best time to leave. And so we all jump out of our chairs and run for it, with La-La Lloyd and Hightops in the lead, and Henton and Jimmy and me galloping like horses, and all five of us thundering down the stairs in a rush.

We burst into the street, and already La-La Lloyd and Hightops are out of sight, their shoes going *toc-toc-toc* and *snick-snick-snick*, very fast somewhere far ahead of us in the dark.

The next day dawns, and it's a beautiful day, a very bright day, and here I am at the Brookside in Elsie's Kitchen Nook having breakfast with Henton, who is explaining to me the full sequence of events as he understands them.

"It comes to me," he says, "when you keep nagging about the game, that there are two things I remember about it. First, that Sam Gates, alias Joe Funk, is greatly unhappy about the cabbage he loses to me, which is truly some very large cabbage, what you might even call mazuma. And second, that on the night I am robbed, Sam and then Eagle Beak disappear from the room, leaving me alone with Hightops and La-La Lloyd. So thinking about this, I see that perhaps Sam does try to recoup his losses by relieving me of some personal property, which is to say by burgling my apartment, a thing not difficult for him to do on account of he knows exactly where I am, and what I'm doing, and how long I'm likely to be doing it. And I further recall a very interesting fact about Sam Gates, alias Joe Funk."

"And what is that?"

"He was once very prominent in the second-story game and is therefore pretty much the individual to decide to undertake this sort of enterprise."

"I see."

"So Sam, alias Joe, proceeds to my apartment, lets himself in, and prepares to relieve me of any small and valuable items. But when he spots the furniture, and sees that it is very fine furniture indeed, he

changes his plan and decides to relieve me of everything that is not nailed down. There is only one problem."

"What is that?"

"He is a small guy and cannot remove the large items without help."

I nod, buttering my toast. "And so he fetches Jimmy Quicks."

"Correct."

"But while he is out fetching him, Eagle Beak arrives."

"Correct again."

"And what is Eagle Beak's idea?"

"His idea is to collect on the cash offer from Detroit to put Sam's mind at rest. He is there for the money." Henton takes a slice of toast from my plate and thoughtfully munches it. "And neither Sam nor Joe notices Eagle Beak when they arrive back at the apartment for the simple reason that Eagle Beak does not wish to be noticed at that particular moment."

"He is standing in the bathtub behind the shower curtain."

"Yes. And Joe, of course, uses the washroom."

I can see it clearly now there in my mind's eye. Jimmy going downstairs to put the microwave oven in the truck, and Sam Gates, alias Joe Funk, entering the bathroom to use the facilities. He seats himself. Makes himself comfortable.

Then maybe he hears something, or maybe he doesn't, but at that moment the shower curtain suddenly slides back.

"Bang," I say.

Henton nods.

"Bang. Eagle Beak outs with the old aerator and ventilates Sam right there on the spot. It's too bad he uses such a large howitzer, as the slug passes completely through Sam's person and damages a valuable commode. But Eagle Beak does not care about the commode. He knows that Jimmy will be back in a moment, and to buy time for his departure he stuffs Sam, alias Joe, into the sofa bed. He is gone before Jimmy walks back through the door."

"So," I say, watching Henton reach for the last of my toast, "I suppose that Eagle Beak then beats it to a phone and claims the payoff. I suppose they wire him the money immediately, as they have great faith in him, knowing him to be a sincere individual who will not cheat them."

"Maybe. Or more likely they have paid him in advance."

"Right. But what is it happens later when we arrive? You know, with Eagle Beak and the trick-or-treaters?"

"Oh, the ghosts and goblins, they upset him greatly. I think you observe that for yourself."

"I did observe it. He's a superstitious individual?"

"Yes, that is very well known. Eagle Beak is *greatly* superstitious. *Highly* superstitious. In fact, he is so superstitious he will not walk past a graveyard."

"You were deliberately provoking him."

"Let's say I was testing him."

"Well," I say, "this is all very well. I can see, then, why he might have got agitated. Especially with you giving his money away the whole time. But why does he fly off his nut and let loose with the howitzer?"

"That," Henton says, "was Jimmy's doing. When Jimmy brings Joe up from the car, the only place he can think to put him, on account of there's no furniture, is on the throne in the bathroom, propped against the tank. And when Eagle Beak bolts for the john, he finds Sam Gates, alias Joe Funk, sitting there, just as Eagle Beak left him in my apartment. It is déjà vu all over again, except this time Sam is winking at him. It's the last straw. Eagle Beak panics. He has been paid to do a job and he has not done it."

"And so he uses the gun again?"

"That is correct."

"And pumps more missiles into Sam?"

"Also correct."

I give this some thought, and then I say, "Just one question."

"Sure."

"How *does* the microwave come to be all bunged up like that?"

"Oh," Henton says, laughing, "it was always bunged up, from the first day I got it."

I look at him.

"But you said—"

"Sure, sure, I know what I said. But I had to hold out a bit, didn't I? That way if somebody makes up some story about it, I will know right away that they are lying. You passed the test."

This is what I like about Henton. He reposes such faith in his friends and acquaintances. He mops up the last of my egg with the toast and pops it into his mouth.

"You aren't put out at me, are you?" Henton asks.

"Oh, no," I say.

"Great," Henton says. "Because I wanted to ask you. That microwave oven. What do you think I could get for it?"



Sinkhole

Carol Cail

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this.”
He couldn’t believe Maudie had actually said that, in all seriousness, less than fifteen minutes ago at the Kentucky Hunker Inn.

“Right,” he’d said, pointing his foot to slide on the first sock. “In the future I can just cross the street from my house to yours. Saves a motel bill, too.”

Then she had pursed her rosebud mouth and uttered the next cliché. “If you don’t tell your wife about us, I will.”

"Maudie! Love!" He twisted around to grab and agitate her. It was like shaking his ten-year-old son, all loose, light bones.

"Let go," she squealed. "No more touching me till Karen knows." She brushed his hands off her arms and swatted his chest.

Staring morosely at the flaccid sock caught on his toe, he said, "I'll take care of it tonight."

"You'll tell Karen tonight? You promise?"

"I promise. Tomorrow night latest."

"Arrrrgh!" She flounced off the bed, snatching up clothes, red hair wild as a bonfire. "All right, Craig Richard Longworth. You have exactly two hours from this moment. That's—" she wrenched his arm out of his lap to read his watch "—eight forty-six. If you haven't broken the news to Karen by then, *I'm* telling her at eight forty-seven."

"Jeeze, Maudie—"

The slamming bathroom door chopped off all appeals.

Now on his way home, Craig turned the Camry in at Trudy's Tavern, needing to soothe his nerves and shore up his resolve.

The first beer disappeared as if he had a train to catch. Looking over the sparse early evening crowd, he sipped the second.

"Burger and fries?" Trudy suggested.

What the heck, might as well spoil his supper; Karen wasn't going to feed him tonight after they had their little talk.

Swiveling on his stool, leaning his elbows on the bar behind, he studied faces. Most of them were familiar, including Lionel Eads', who was nuzzling the pale ear of a buxom blonde boothmate. Craig didn't recognize the lady, but he did know she wasn't skinny, red-headed Mrs. Eads. Torn between being scandalized and being envious, he stared at their blatant billing and cooing till Trudy slammed his hamburger plate onto the counter.

Turning around, he sighed. It was a whole different story for Lionel. He didn't have any children for his wife to take away if he asked for a divorce.

Divorce. The word conjured up horrendous visions of infinite alimony and inequitable division of property. Karen would get the stereo and the boat, and he'd get the Mickey Mouse telephone and the 1970 fake leather encyclopedias.

Craig took a vicious bite of the hamburger, swabbed grease off his chin with the cocktail napkin, and lurched forward under a hearty slap to his back.

"Hi, neighbor," Lionel bellowed. "Whaddya know?"

Squinting over his shoulder, Craig nodded at Lionel and took another look at the blonde waiting for the next round of beer and sweet talk.

"I got a date with your wife in the morning," Lionel said in the same robust volume, hand-signaling an order to Trudy.

Grinning was an effort that made Craig's face ache. "Yeah? Why's that?"

"We're going to plant a half-ton boulder on that sinkhole in your back yard."

"Oh. Oh yeah. Karen did say she'd contracted to have that covered over. We've been afraid one of the kids would twist an ankle in it. Or worse."

"Hey, Trudy honey, how about some service?" Lionel called as she rushed by with empty pitchers.

"Um, who's the young lady with you?" Craig stage-whispered, curiosity overcoming tact.

"My sister." Lionel punthed Craig's arm.

"Does your wife know you have a sister?"

"You mean, does my sister know I have a wife!" Reaching across Craig for the mugs Trudy offered, Lionel roared a malty laugh.

A few minutes later Craig watched them leave, holding hands and giggling like teenagers.

He ought to go, too. Checking his watch, he decided to put it off till the last minute, and he stood up to challenge someone to darts.

Crazy Chester Gompers was telling another outrageous joke. Guffawing, Craig banged his forehead against his wrist on the bar, and one eye focused on the slime-green digits of his watch. Eight forty-two.

Giving a Cinderella gasp, he slapped bills on the bar and caromed to the front door. In a few panting seconds he was spinning tires for home, thirty minutes away if he didn't break any speed laws.

Driving forty in a twenty mile zone, he argued with himself. Maudie wouldn't really march across their quiet little dead-end street and blab the whole sordid—

Sure she would. She loved him, wanted him, would do anything—

Realizing his preening had allowed a drop in the miles per hour, Craig shook himself and tramped on the accelerator again. The car clock blinked another minute older.

It said eight fifty-six when he turned through the stone arches of Country View Estates (Your Little Piece of the World). He noticed that Lionel Eads' house loomed black as he passed it, and a minute later he was on Strawberry Lane. In no hurry now that he could see his and Maudie's houses, he rolled quietly along, craning to see which lights were on at either place, searching for female shapes inside or out.

Maudie's ranch style was completely dark. Oh-oh. His own split-level beckoned with one gleaming kitchen window. As his headlights swept the barricade at the end of the street, oak trees in the cow pasture beyond waved colorless leaves at a late summer breeze.

"Karen?" he asked an obviously empty house from the garage/kitchen door.

Hearing a clink of sound, he flipped on the outside floodlight and squinted into the back yard. Karen was by the far fence, wrestling a long-handled shovel that had the weight advantage.

Craig strolled out to face her with a casualness he couldn't have faked without a stomach full of beer. "Digging for gold?"

She wiped her cheek with a limp wrist.

"I saw Lionel Eads today," Craig said with the same false cheerfulness he'd disliked from Lionel. "Says he'll be by tomorrow to cover this up."

Karen grunted.

"So what are you doing?" Craig said.

"Just trying to level it off. Spread some dirt on it. Make it smaller."

He eyed her handiwork critically. The fist-sized sinkhole was now more than a foot across. Considering what else he needed to tell her, he didn't think he'd mention she was doing a lousy job.

Jamming hands in trousers, he twisted to look around the board-fenced yard. "Where is everybody?"

"Everybody?"

"Rick. Where's Rick?"

"Slumber party at Mitchy Best's."

"Uh, I noticed Maude Lamar's house is all dark. Thought she might be over here."

"Nope." She threw a half shovel's worth of dirt on the hole, and it slithered out of sight like flour down a funnel. "She was here a while ago, though."

"Oh?" Craig cleared his throat and lowered his voice to normal range. "What did our little widow want?"

Karen whacked the hole with the flat of the shovel. "She picked up Rick to take him and her Jimmy to Mitchy Best's slumber party."

"Oh. I guess she was in a hurry and didn't have much to say?"

"Actually, she did say—" She leaned on the shovel and stared at the house.

Craig poised in a tennis player stance, awaiting a tricky serve.

"—her aunt in Cleveland died. Hope you don't mind if we keep Jimmy till Maude gets back from the funeral."

A weak breeze licked his damp forehead. "No problem! What's for supper?"

"Oh, I don't know. How about steak?" She jabbed the shovel at a line of loose gravel and scraped it in a sibilant rivulet down the hole.

"You know that's hopeless," Craig said, buoyed by the reprieve Maudie's aunt had given him. "How many rocks and sticks and junk have we thrown down that hole the last couple of years?"

"And toys," Karen said. "The boys have been dropping in Lincoln Logs and Tinkertoys and other stuff they think they've outgrown. Rick lost his birthday dump truck down here today." She straight-armed the shovel handle at Craig and bent to get the sweater she'd shed on a nearby bush.

"It's probably part of a limestone cave network," he said, jiggling the shovel up and down and from hand to hand. He narrowed beer-bemused eyes at the white stripe of neck between her black hair and T-shirt. "Bottomless."

Eureka, his mind exalted as the inspiration zapped him, as his arms elevated on their own accord, as the shovel descended with the accuracy of a heat-seeking missile, as the blow reverberated up his wrists, elbows, shoulders.

Karen collapsed without a sound, imploding from a woman to a bundle of clothes. Squeamish about touching her, Craig toed her over to the sinkhole. Her head dropped in. Her shoulders were too wide.

Yanking her up and away, he grabbed up the shovel and made panicky jabs at the opening's edges, twisting off chunks of dirt that disappeared silently inside. Whimpering, Craig tried Karen for size again, dragged her out of the way again, stabbed at the hole's perimeters again.

Now he was expecting her to groan and sit up. He imagined her lying there playing dead till he should have the hole big enough and then—wham—she'd shove him between the shoulder blades and he'd fall into the gaping black, his screams echoing off the clammy walls as he fell, eyes bulging in a vain effort to see as he fell, the air whistling past his ears as he fell and fell and fell.

He slammed down the shovel, grasped his wife, and stuffed her through the opening.

No screams. No thumps. No splash. No sound except his breaths sawing in and out.

Craig spent an hour beside the sinkhole, listening to crickets, expecting two bloody hands to reach out of the abyss and grab him by the throat. Then he went to bed and dreamed a rerun of his fears.

In the morning, as Craig sipped at his fourth cup of black coffee, Lionel Eads and his winched truck and a muscular helper arrived to cover the sinkhole with a granite boulder the color of ashes. Lionel looked as if he could use four cups of black coffee, too; he yawned and stared off into space with red-rimmed eyes.

Two days passed. Because he sold insurance, Craig had a home office. He found excuses to be away from it as much as possible. It overlooked the back yard and Karen's giant grave marker.

Maudie didn't come home. Craig watched her driveway with the eagerness of a child expecting Christmas.

If anyone asked, Karen had gone to visit friends in California. Craig hoped for an earthquake in which she could conveniently go missing.

"Dad, look what Jimmy and me found!" Rick deposited a muddy truck on the kitchen table, just missing Craig's pepperoni pizza supper.

"Where you guys been?" Craig scolded like a mother. "Wash up and get it while it's hot."

"Yeah, but look, Mr. Longworth," Jimmy insisted. "We found Rick's dump truck."

"Right where he left it, right?" Craig ruffled the two heads of hair, one dark, one orange.

"No!" they said together.

Rick's deeper voice won the fight to tell. "We lost it down the sinkhole."

Craig felt for a chair back and eased himself into the seat. "Yeah, I remember now. And where did you find it?"

"In the cow pasture. Over the rise. Down by a little creek."

"We figure there's a underground river right under your yard," Jimmy butted in. "We're going to dig up close to the boulder and see if we can make more stuff disappear and watch for it to come out."

"No!" His own voice gave him a headache. More quietly he added, "It sounds dangerous to me. No, listen. You stay away from both ends of it till I have time to check it out. I mean it, now. No sneaking over to the pasture or I'll tan you both."

Craig sneaked over to the pasture. The moon glowed nearly as bright as his flashlight. The cool night smelled of damp grass and cattle.

Having scaled the wire fence, he hiked up the long, gentle incline, using the shovel as a walking stick, then down the steeper other side. Toward the bottom, the hill deteriorated into a cliff. Dodging scrub oak, Craig skidded on heels and rear, down to the creek and halfway across it.

Cold water seeped into his shoes while cold dread seeped everywhere else. The flashlight glared on a creekbed full of brown pebbles, some shaped exactly like Lincoln Logs.

Aiming the light upstream, Craig waded toward the rock formation that hung, cavelike, over the water. Resting a hand on the gritty limestone, he leaned to peer at the spot where the creek percolated out of a ground fissure the size of a bathtub.

He groaned and sat down on the nearest half-submerged boulder. The dump truck had been lost just hours before Karen went into the sinkhole. She must be due any moment now. He pointed the light into the bathtub and steeled himself to wait.

His chin slipped off his hand, and he jerked up straight.

The gurgling creek had begun to gargle. Trying to steady the flashlight, he peered into a growing whirlpool. When the first sneakered foot floated up, he scrubbed at his face, thinking—hoping—he was still asleep.

An ankle, bloodless as the white shoe, drifted into view. Another foot appeared, the shoelaces trailing gracefully. Legs sheathed in dark blue denim. Knees. Thighs.

Unable to stand the suspense a heartbeat longer, Craig waded into the chilly water, grasped the slick ankles, and yanked. No Ahab ever fought harder to subdue his obsession. Floundering for

footholds on the slippery rock, his muscles aching with her dead weight, he finally fell backwards, the cold body enveloping him like a nightmare.

Rolling out from under, he sat up coughing—and froze, seeing her still radiant red hair.

He doubled over for several moments, hyperventilating. Wiping his eyes and nose with the tail of his shirt, he dragged the shovel over and used it as a crutch to haul himself upright. Still snuffling water, he reached down unwillingly and tipped her over.

It wasn't Maudie.

Surprise dropped him onto his hands and knees, and closer up, he confirmed it. Not Maudie.

Mrs. Lionel Eads.

Where did that son-of-a-bee come off using *his* sinkhole to dispose of *his* dead bodies?

When the first wave of anger sucked away, he indulged in a few tears of relief that this limp, marble-eyed woman wasn't Maudie. Then he stomped off into the flatter pastureland, looking for a suitable place to bury her.

Digging through the grass was like digging through woven cloth, and the earth underneath rang like concrete. Craig worked up a sweat and a strength-endowing fury.

"Doing *his* dirty work," he muttered, jabbing with the shovel. "Kills his *wife* and leaves *me* to clean up the mess. Probably with his *sweetie* pie right now. Not a worry in the *world*. Some people just have no *consideration* for others."

He planted Mrs. Eads about two feet under, and then he returned to the creek to wait for Karen. Every few minutes he felt the need to throw back his head in a mute, face-wrenching scream.

Morning arrived before his wife's body did. He tried to think what to do, which wasn't easy, his mind being fuddled from lack of sleep.

Finally he hid the flashlight and shovel in a patch of wild raspberries and trudged up the hill to the fence. Crouching behind it, he scouted the peaceful neighborhood before climbing over and striding home.

After the first three cups of coffee, he phoned his sister. Barbara Junior answered.

"Howdy, partner. Let me talk to your mom."

"Uncle Craig, Rick has been taking my stuff and not giving it back."

"Okay, I'll get after him. Let me talk to—"

"He broke the head off my Barbie, and he said he'd fix it but he never did. And he and Jimmy played keep-away with Fozzie Bear and—"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll talk to him. First I got to talk to Barbara."

Barbara Junior yelled, "Mommaphone'sforyou!" in his ear.

He had time to chew his left thumbnail to the quick before his sister answered.

"Karen's gone to California and Maudie's gone to Cleveland," Craig said in a rush. "I've got the two boys and I'm sick—the flu or something. Okay if I send them over to you for a while?"

"I guess." Barb sounded as thrilled as Barb Junior would be when she got the news.

The boys weren't all that thrilled either.

"Their house smells like cats," Jimmy said.

"And their cats smell like skunks," Rick said.

The pasture smelled of skunk, too, when Craig slipped over into it later in the morning. He struggled to carry a sleeping bag, a gallon thermos of coffee, a brown bag full of ham sandwiches, a bottle of insect repellent, a bottle of aspirin, a couple of paperback books, and a pickax.

He had to force himself to walk straight to the head of the stream and look into the natural bathtub, afraid of finding Karen but wanting her to be there so this could be over. The water rippled empty in the dappled shade.

Maybe she had snagged on a rock or something. Maybe she was too big to fit through the underground stream outlet, and she wouldn't reappear until time whittled her down to bones. Maybe she was still alive, clawing her way randomly through the endless dark.

He had to watch for a while.

Craig spread out the sleeping bag, ranged the rest of his property along one side, picked up a book, and sat down. A cloud slid in front of the sun, graying the landscape, making him shiver. The pool coughed softly.

The book was short stories. He opened it at random. Poe. "The Tell-Tale Heart."

*

The body arrived just after dark.

A mass of clouds had shut down the moon, and lightning exploded on the west horizon, a little closer every blast. Toward the south, the brush crackled, and bass voices murmured, indicating cows on the prowl. Craig wished he'd brought extra batteries for the yellowing flashlight. His life had become a horror movie.

Like Mrs. Eads', this body came feet first and stomach down. As the legs swam into view, Craig stared, trying to decide whether this would be Karen or Maudie. He no longer believed in Cleveland.

The hips undulated free and then an expanse of pale waist where the shirt had hiked up and ripped. Back. Arms. Ringless hands, unnaturally white and puckered. Craig's eyes burned, unblinking and dry, as he strained for a first glimpse of her hair.

Thunder smashed. Sharp, cold rain began to beat. The neck came into view. There was no head.

Craig sunk down in the pouring rain to cry. It felt as if all the moisture streaming down his face came from inside him, a flood of guilt and grief.

After perhaps five self-indulgent minutes, he moved to haul the body from the stream. Not having the strength to bury it, he squatted on the soggy sleeping bag for another vigil.

After perhaps an hour, the dog came out. It was black and sleek, though that was probably because it was wet and dead. In life, it might have been an unsheared brown poodle. Perhaps the one that used to yap at anything that moved, over on Quince Court.

Groaning, Craig waded in to pull him out and lay him beside the headless woman.

"I should have charged my neighbors for the waste disposal service I didn't know I was running," he complained.

Renewed splashing signaled something else being regurgitated from the sink. Craig shuffled to the edge. "You speak, and I obey."

This time boots showed first, heavy combat boots, followed by green and brown blotched pants. Craig blinked rain out of his eyes. Numbed beyond any capability for surprise, he gazed at the muscular arms, the camouflage-shirted chest, the thick neck, the gleaming, piggy eyes.

The soldier gently rocked on his back in the susurrous bathtub. After a moment of studying him, Craig returned to the sleeping bag and sat on its puddled middle.

*

The next morning, sun sizzled against his eyelids until he opened them.

Like a vision, an angel, Maudie came slip-sliding down the cliff above the creek. She wore white slacks, a yellow blazer, white sneakers, and a shining smile.

"Hey. What are you doing?" she called ahead.

Craig scrambled up and rushed to intercept her.

"Camping out," he said. "Don't look."

"Don't look at what? Phewie. When did you last have a bath?"

"You really were in Cleveland?" He touched her neck reverently, admiring how it securely attached her head to her torso.

"Where are the boys?" She leaned to peer past him, and he jumped sideways to block her view.

"They're at my sister's. Karen's in California. Maybe there'll be an earthquake. How did you know where I was?"

"Mrs. Judd saw you and your gear schlumping over here last night." Maudie laughed uncertainly. "Are you okay? You're as white as a sheet."

"No cliches!" He clapped his hands over his ears.

"You're too weird, Craig. I'm going home and have some breakfast." She patted one of his hands, which still covered his ear, and, turning, struggled provocatively up the hill.

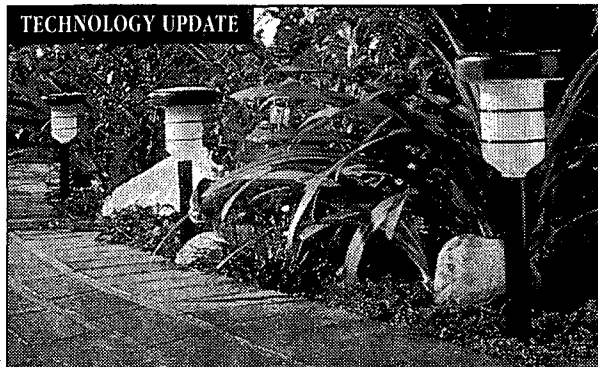
Who should she call? Maudie labored through the pasture, unmindful of the stick-tights, the poison ivy, the cow pies. She walked hard and fast and planned to climb the fence the same way, all the while expecting Craig to shout for her to stop.

Who should she call? The police? A doctor? Who *do* you call when the man you've slept with a few times sets up camp in the middle of a field to, apparently, play with toys?

She would let Barbara handle it. "Here's the deal, Barbara," she'd say. "I don't know your brother very well, but being a friend of Karen's, I feel I have a duty, you know? Craig is around the bend, flipped his lid, off his rocker. He's hermiting down by the creek with a bunch of Lincoln Logs, a teddy bear, a GI Joe, and a headless Barbie doll, for God's sake."

Thank goodness her relationship with Craig hadn't passed the point of no return. She wasn't worried that he'd told Karen about their fooling around. You can put a man over a barrel, but you can't make him drink.

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE



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by Bob S. Garrard

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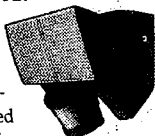
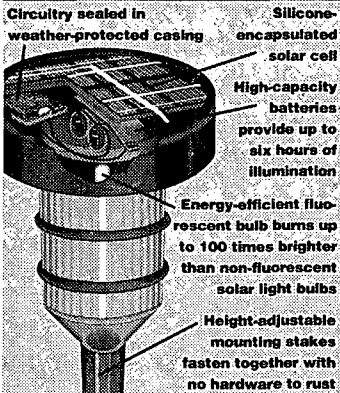
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FICTION



Pick of the Litter

Judith L. Post

Illustration by Jason Eckhardt

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Hildie's eyes snapped open. The cottage was empty; she could feel it. Ink had left her.

It took her a while to struggle to her feet. Her joints were stiff with arthritis. She'd have to make up another potion, and it hadn't been that long since she'd brewed up her last cauldron of health elixir.

As she gingerly made her way down the steep wooden stairs to the small sitting room at the front of the house, she felt every bit of her three centuries old. Being a witch wasn't everything it was cracked up to be. Once you reached a certain age, everything was magic and maintenance.

She went to the kitchen and put the kettle on. There was nothing like a nice cup of hemlock tea to revive the old spirits. As the water boiled, she glanced out the window into her back yard. The little boy from next door was stealing apples from her tree again. She cackled. He was such an ornery, into-everything little squirt. He drove his poor mother crazy, trying to work and raise him on her own. Hildie had thought of a punishment to fit his crime. Every time he bit into one of her stolen apples, his I.Q. went up a few points. His teachers couldn't believe how much he'd improved in school, from a D mental rating to above average intelligence. If he weren't careful, he'd actually amount to something, Hildie laughed. And so would his rotten young friends who were waiting outside her fence to share his ill-gotten goods.

None of them was brave enough to set foot in her yard. Hildie made sure she looked the image of a frightful medieval witch with coarse gray hair that stood out like dried matchsticks around her gray, wrinkled face. She even went for the long, bumpy nose with a wart on the end, and she always dressed in long, flowing black.

Her appearance was enough to keep most of the kids away from her yard, but not Mikey. Nothing intimidated him. And that's why she liked him. Ink, for her part, had grown fond of Mikey's big sister Madeleine, and Hildie could understand why. The girl had practically raised the boy, since their mother had to work so much. That's what was the matter with this day and age, Hildie thought, too many broken homes. Why, back in Salem, or even in the Old Country, no self-respecting man would desert his wife and kids. Only in America. Only in "modern times." Hildie wondered what people would make of the twentieth century a few hundred years from now. She'd be curious to see how historians judged it when

she was far enough away to put it in perspective. Maybe as a Dark Age for the Family.

The teakettle whistled, and she chuckled at herself. Thank goodness it was almost Halloween when she'd regain her full powers. Every year at this time, when the leaves were falling and the flowers were dying, her powers dwindled, turning her into a mellow old soul. Soon she'd be tempted to write her memoirs. What a crock! It was bad enough that she'd given up black magic when she'd jumped on her broomstick and flown to America. All that cursing and getting burned at the stake had seemed to fit in the old days, but she was older now. And wiser. A girl can only stay sullen and rebellious in those teenage years; then you get a tad longer in the tooth, and what had once been exciting seems selfish and shallow. Even for a witch.

She'd wanted a fresh start, so she'd revved up the old broom and crossed the Atlantic. And it had been different here. There was a feeling of hope, of unlimited potential. But, of course, everything changes. Nothing stays young and vibrant forever. Not even a country.

Her little cottage had been deep in a wood when she'd settled here, but the town miles away had grown into a city, and the city had pushed past her into the suburbs. Finally what had been shiny new bungalows had fallen into disrepair, and the entire area was considered a slum. "Slum" and "ghetto." Both words tasted good on Hildie's tongue. They fit a witch's home somehow. And it wasn't as if she had to worry about urban violence. She still had enough magic in the old bones to turn anyone who messed with her into a toad. But people mostly took one look at her rundown house (the way she liked it) and her wizened old face and left her alone.

All but Mikey, bless his incorrigible little heart.

She sipped her tea. Where was that cat?

Madeleine pulled her sweater tighter around her and hurried down the empty street. Mama had warned her over and over again not to go out by herself after dark. "It's asking for trouble, a woman alone, especially in this neighborhood." And Mama was usually right. But Jimmy was waiting for her in the boarded-up house on Jefferson Street. Jimmy, with his long blond hair and deep blue eyes, with the dragon tattoo on his left arm and his black leather jacket. Madeleine had never been around a boy like Jimmy before. Mama wouldn't let her go to any of the places where young people

hung out, like the pool hall or the club where the underground bands played.

"Those ain't no places for a girl like you," Mama always said. "That's where all the riffraff goes. You go to the library or join the church group and meet someone nice."

Boring. That's what Mama should have said. Madeleine was sixteen years old, and her whole world revolved around watching Mikey, studying hard to make good grades, and going to church. She was beginning to think that getting a scholarship was only a pipe dream anyway, and that the church only preached a lot of platitudes that were empty promises. Life was a blue-collar job and lots of long hours for someone like her; if she were lucky, she'd meet someone really gorgeous and have a little fun before she had to join the grind.

Cutting through the alley that led from Smith to Jackson, she almost tripped over a cat that skittered underfoot. The cat stopped and stared at her with unblinking yellow eyes. Its fur was a smooth, luxurious, midnight black. Like velvet, she thought. She knelt slightly, stretching out a hand to touch it. The yellow eyes narrowed; then the cat surprised her. It crouched and sprang toward her. She jumped, startled, before finding the cat safely in her arms.

Now, how had she done that? Still, it comforted her somehow to have the cat cradled against her. She stroked its sleek head, and it pushed its face against her chin. It liked her. Smiling, she hugged it to her as she angled past Fairfield and approached the house from the back, hoping no one would notice her.

Hildie frowned as she watched the sun slide beneath the horizon. Ink still wasn't home, and it wasn't like her to disappear with no warning. The cat had been acting strange lately. She'd been eating a lot more than usual, and her naturally thin frame had rounded in the middle. She'd been moodier than ever, too.

At first Hildie had put it down to the approaching holiday. The last time Ink had lost one of her lives was on a Halloween. Some teenage boys had set fire to a barn she'd been hiding in. Ever since that time, the sight of kids dressed as hooligans and goblins made the poor cat edgy.

A terrible death, burning. Hildie knew all about fire licking your bones. That's how she'd died her second time when there'd been a big witch hunt in Europe. She'd probably deserved it back then.

When mankind wouldn't let her be, she'd taken pleasure in withering their crops or turning their water supply brackish. Revenge does have its price, though. They'd hunted her entire coven down and burned each one of them at the stake. Her fourth time, she'd been hanged in Salem—and she'd been on her best behavior in that lifetime, but no one ever said life is fair. Thank goodness both witches and their familiars have nine lives. If Hildie had counted right, she and Ink still had a few to go.

She couldn't imagine life without Ink. The cat had been with her since she'd switched from mere mortality to chants and spells. Ink was Hildie's Significant Other. She didn't want to continue without her.

"A cat?" Jimmy asked as Madeleine pushed open the rotted kitchen door. He was sitting on the floor with his back supported against a dirty, off-white wall. His long legs stretched across the yellowed linoleum, and a pile of cigarette butts lay in a heap by the wallboard. A jumble of empty beer bottles lay in the corner. This obviously wasn't the first time he'd visited the house.

A "condemned" sign was posted on the front door, but the city took its time about pulling down deserted buildings.

"I hate cats," Jimmy stated.

"This one jumped right into my arms," Madeleine explained. "It was as if we were meant for each other."

"He's a stray." He took a long swig of beer. "Probably thought you looked like a sucker."

Madeleine nuzzled the sleek fur. "I think he's beautiful. I'm going to take him home when I leave. Maybe Mom will let me keep him."

A grin tugged at Jimmy's lips. "Yeah, right, but let's not be in any hurry, okay?" He stretched his arm out, offering her some of his beer.

She shook her head. "I'd better not. Mom'll smell it on my breath."

He looked up at her. "I didn't invite you to my secret place to talk about your mother. Come on. Have a seat." He patted the floor beside him.

Madeleine looked at the dirty linoleum with distaste and carefully lowered herself next to him. "Do you come here a lot?"

"No, dimwit." He sighed, running a hand through his long blond hair. "Only when I want a little privacy, when I don't want the whole world to know what I'm up to."

"You mean, drinking?"

He laughed. "Are you for real, or is this an innocent little act you do to turn guys on? And get rid of the furball, will you? He looks evil or something."

Madeleine let the cat loose, then turned to study him. "What act?"

"You're really good. I never knew you were so funny." He broke up, slapping the floor with the flat of his hand. His laughter was a little too loud, his eyes a little too glazed. The cat bounded to the sinktop and glared down at him.

Madeleine pulled slightly away from him. "You're drunk, aren't you?"

"Not too drunk," he said meaningfully. "I can still show you a good time."

"You said you wanted to talk to me, that it would be nice if we got to know each other better."

"That's what every guy says," he told her. "What did you think I wanted when I asked you to meet me at a condemned house? Where we'd be alone?"

"I'm not sure I like you any more." She started to stand up, but he grabbed at her shoulder and pushed her back down.

"Not so fast, sweetie. We haven't had any fun yet." His fist knotted in her sweater, and he gave a sharp tug.

At Madeleine's first gasp, a low growl started deep in the cat's throat. It rose to a high-pitched yowl, and the cat crouched, ready to spring.

Jimmy laughed. "The furball thinks it's going to protect you." He hurled his empty bottle toward the cat's head.

The cat easily sidestepped the bottle and flung herself toward Jimmy's chest. Her claws sank deep into his flesh, and her teeth ripped into his cheek.

Cursing, Jimmy clenched her sleek body; but the cat squirmed from his reach and ran toward the archway that led to the living room.

"You're history, cat!" Jimmy yelled, lurching to his feet and staggering after her.

Hildie felt for Ink with her mind. She and the cat were in tune with each other. If Ink were anywhere nearby, Hildie would find her. After several minutes of searching, she jerked to attention. Ink was in one of her moods, all right, stubborn and furious. There

was a hint of fear, too. That meant that the bothersome creature was probably in trouble.

Pulling herself to her full height, Hildie summoned her broom. If someone were picking on Ink, they'd have to deal with her, too, arthritis and all. Let these modern mortals test their mettle with a witch.

Using her mind as a magnet to find her cat, she opened her back door and flew through the night sky.

The air was cool, and the breeze blew her hair back from her face. It had been a long time since she'd cavorted on her broomstick. There'd been too many people around, she was afraid someone would notice. But maybe she should take a trip every once in a while, get away from the city and stretch her magic muscles.

The trip was over almost as soon as it started. Ink was only a few blocks away. Hildie frowned as she climbed off her broomstick in an overgrown back yard and made her way up rickety stairs to a door hanging slantwise on broken hinges. She could hear a girl crying inside and a man cursing loudly. As she stepped into a shabby, empty kitchen, she saw Ink streak through a dining room archway and stop short at her feet. A thin trickle of blood seeped from a gash below her right ear. Her bright yellow eyes narrowed as a man turned the corner, hefting a sharp stick in his hand. Usually she would have been fast enough to avoid him. With her extra weight, he must have gotten close enough to swing at her, though, and all of a sudden Hildie understood.

"You're pregnant, aren't you?" she said, looking at the cat.

Ink blinked in answer.

"And your kitten is for Maddie here? She's the next chosen?"

Another blink.

The man was losing patience. "Look, old lady, I don't know what you're doing here, but if that's your cat, you should have it put to sleep. Look what it's done to me." He pulled back his shirt, showing deep claw marks on his throat and chest. "Do us all a favor and get it out of here before I wring its lousy neck."

"Ink came to protect Madeleine," Hildie said. "I'd say she had her reasons to dislike you."

He gaped. "Look, old broad, I don't want any trouble, but I don't have to put up with any garbage. Who are you, anyway? What right have you got sticking your big nose in our business?"

"My name's Brunhilde, Hildie for short. And I'm Madeleine's neighbor. I intend to tutor her, and you're not part of her education."

"Is that right?" He advanced toward her menacingly. "And what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't intend to do anything," Hildie said. "You're not much of a challenge for me, but my broom has been retired far too long. She'd love a good fight." Puckering her lips, she whistled.

"Your broom?" Jimmy asked. "Are you a nutcase?" But the words died on his lips when her broom zipped into the house and began thrashing him with its handle. "Make it stop!" he yelled, taking several sound thwacks.

Hildie made a clicking noise, and the broom paused in midair.

Jimmy stared at her. "Wait till I tell everyone about you!" he hissed. "You're going to be run out of the neighborhood."

Hildie chuckled. "Go ahead. Tell all your friends that a broom beat you up, and an old lady is a witch."

His face worked, but he didn't say anything. Finally he cried, "Just wait! Someday I'm gonna get you. I'm gonna blast you and your broom and your damn cat."

Hildie raised her eyebrows, and her jaundiced eyes glowed as malevolently as Ink's. "You could do that," she said. "But my powers are stronger than you'll ever know. When I finish my curse on you, you'd better pray that I live long and well because if anything happens to me, something much worse will be in store for you."

They were not just empty words, and he seemed to sense it. Not once had Hildie gone to her grave peacefully, and neither had the people who'd sent her there.

"If I were you," Hildie told him, "I'd stay far, far away from me and Madeleine."

Shaking his head, he backed toward the open door. "You're nothing but an ugly old hag, and Madeleine's a sorry little crybaby." It was his last hurrah before he was out of the house.

Hildie turned to Ink. "Are you all right?"

The cat came to twine around her ankles.

She looked at Madeleine. "And you, dear?"

"What did you mean, I'm chosen? And you intend to tutor me?"

"Cats choose their witches," Hildie explained. "Ink plans to give her kitten to you, for your familiar. You must have the power. Ink can sense it."

"And you could teach me how to use it?"

"It takes time. Lots of time."

"Are you wicked?"

"Magic's like anything else," Hildie said. "It can be used for good or evil. I'd guess you'd use it for good." She shrugged. "If that boy had bothered me, though, I might have done something nasty."

Madeleine smiled. "When can I start?"

"After Halloween," Hildie told her. "I never work on the holidays. And for now, I'll walk you home."

"Walk me?" Madeleine looked surprised. "I thought you'd fly me."

Hildie chuckled. "No sense pushing our luck, dear. We've had enough excitement for one night."

As she left Madeleine at her door, though, she couldn't help hopping, sidesaddle, on her broom to zip next door. She'd played it safe too long. Maybe that's what was making her old and stiff instead of age. It had felt good to be incensed enough to *do* something again. She'd been comfortable for several decades, but now it was time to flex her muscles, to throw herself back into life. There were lots of problems out there, and she had lots of spells to play with. Who knew? Maybe Madeleine and she could find some solutions.

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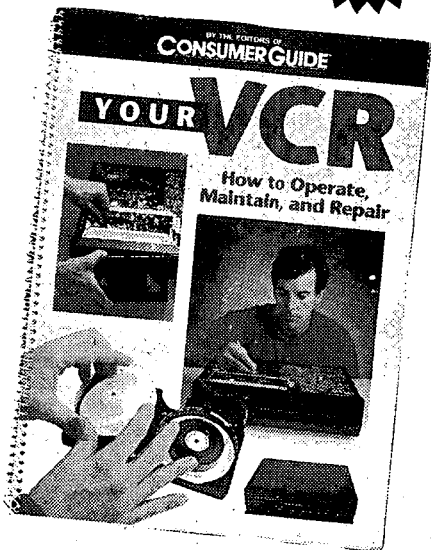


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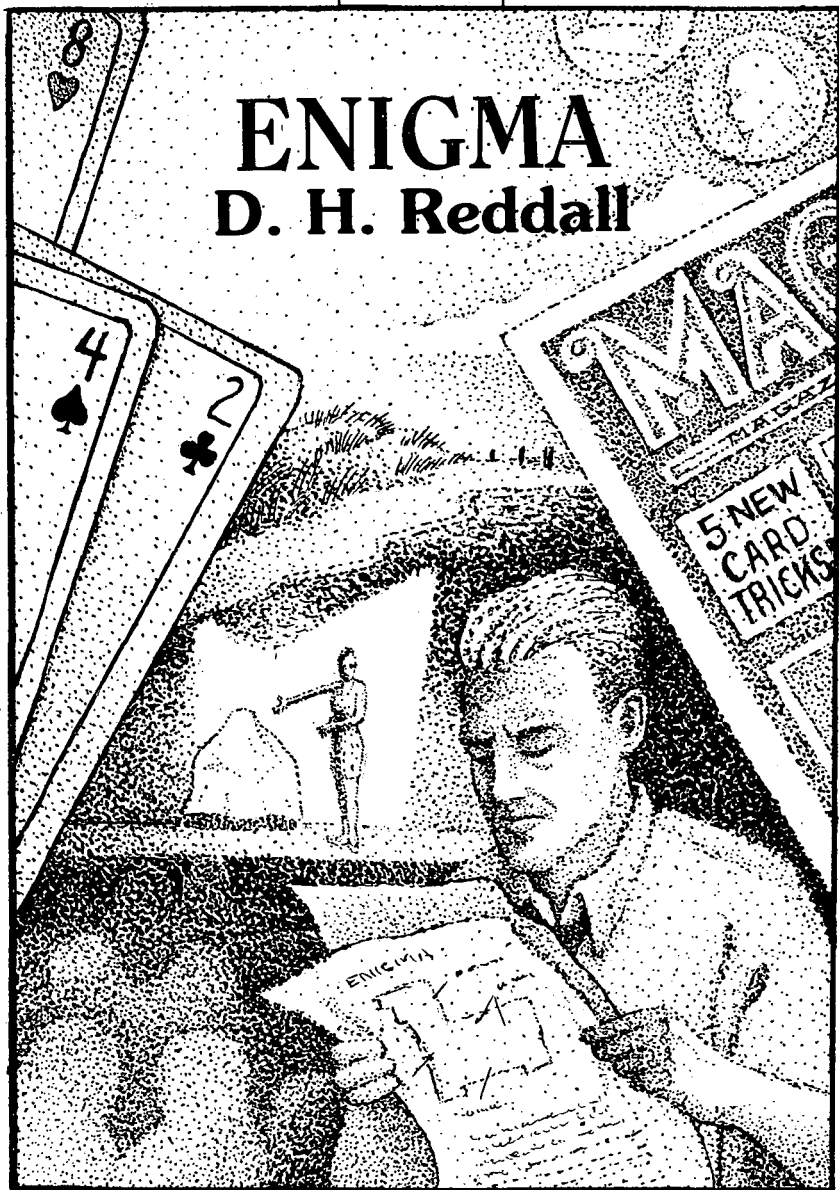


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The city had been driven to its knees by the heat. Flags hung limply on their poles, and the skippers of the big charter sailboats cursed Zephyrus and Aeolus and any other deity that came to mind.

Somehow the tourists persevered, staggering down Main Street in pursuit of Belgian waffles and exotic coffees. All the roads were choked with traffic, and the humid air reeked of exhaust fumes.

August on Cape Cod.

The Chamber of Commerce types want to widen the roads and expand the airports to attract yet more tourism. They view this as progress. No doubt they would call it progress if cannibals began using microwave ovens.

My office was as hot as the hinges of Hell. An ancient Westinghouse fan pushed hot air from one side of the room to the other. I need an air conditioner. Trouble is, every time I get a nickel, I manage to spend a dime.

The door opened and closed so softly that I barely heard it. She was about forty, straight brown hair, white blouse buttoned to the neck, sensible navy skirt, sensible navy shoes. Her purse was clutched in both hands, and she looked at me the way a bird watches an approaching cat.

"Mr. Stubblefield?"

"Yes. Please come in, have a seat."

I led her to the client's chair, and we sat looking at each other for a minute or two.

A visit to a private investigator usually entails revealing something. Often it's something you'd rather leave buried in a deep dark closet at home. I make it a practice to give prospective clients some breathing room, let them set their own pace.

"I've never done this before."

"That's okay. Most people haven't."

She looked around the office. Nothing makes one's shortcomings so obvious as seeing them through another's eyes. Spartan would be a charitable way of describing my office.

"I've never seen a fan quite like that one."

"My father bought it the year Jackie Robinson joined the Dodgers."

She gave me a blank look.

"Nineteen and forty-seven. Whenever it breaks down, I just get it fixed. I like old things."

A polite nod. Some handplay with the purse. A deep breath.

"It's about my brother, Robert. I guess I should say my late brother. The police say he killed himself. I don't believe that for a minute." She

stopped, obviously embarrassed.

Gently I said, "Tell me about it, Ms.—"

"Strather. Elizabeth Strather. Robert was found in a cheap hotel on Division Street. He'd been drinking, of course." She fidgeted in the chair. "There's no easy way to say this, Mr. Stubblefield. My brother was an alcoholic. He'd also been homeless for several years. Something—I don't know—he just gave up." She raised her hands and let them fall back into her lap.

"He was intelligent, likeable—but even when we were little he tended to be wild and unpredictable. I knew he was drinking in high school. It got worse in college. Still, he graduated and went to work that summer.

"After our parents died, Robert got into the habit of visiting every Sunday. Everything seemed all right for a while. Then his visits became irregular. When he did come, he seemed distracted. He lost his job, got another, lost it, and to make a long story short, the alcohol took over. After awhile he was unable to hold a job, and about three years ago he took to living on the streets."

She paused to take a breath and compose herself. I could only imagine the effort re-

quired to tell a stranger something like this.

"He always had a place if he wanted it. I made that clear to him any number of times. Our parents left the house to both of us, after all. But I think he was afraid of embarrassing me, and of burdening me with his problems. Also, strange as it sounds, I think that in some way it was a relief to him to lose everything. He seemed less tense after he moved onto the streets."

"What were the circumstances of his death, Ms. Strather?"

"The police say that he died from an overdose of drugs and alcohol. But, Mr. Stubblefield, Robert wouldn't touch drugs. In fact, he'd had a fear of them ever since a close high school friend of his died from an overdose. I know it sounds naive, and probably contradictory, a man who was a hopeless alcoholic shunning drugs. But I believe that to be the case."

"You implied that you didn't see him much toward the end. It's possible that he might have—changed."

"That's true, I suppose, but understand that Robert's aversion to drugs was extreme. He refused even to take an aspirin.

"One more thing," she continued. "Despite his circumstan-

ces he never once struck me as being suicidal."

"What do you want me to do?"

She sighed. "I'm not sure. I guess I need to know exactly what happened to Robert, what his life was like at the end. If he simply drank himself to death, then that's that. But the uncertainty, the not knowing, this drug thing—I need to know. I just need to know."

We completed the necessary paperwork, and I saw Elizabeth Strather on her way.

I had tried to dissuade her. When someone is going down the tubes, anything can happen. She obviously wanted to salvage something from a horrible situation, to think the best of her brother even under these circumstances. I could understand that, but I had no intention of wasting my time or her money on a lengthy investigation.

First things first. It was past lunchtime, and I'd skipped breakfast. The Rudder was only a block away, so The Rudder it was.

"Ah, Charles. Just in time to help."

"Help what, Floyd?"

Floyd Cusick is the owner of The Rudder, a wiry, balding man, wielder of an acerbic wit, and the author of a tolerable

omelette. He slid a cup of coffee across the counter.

"To purge our language of Francisms."

"Come again?"

"Francisms. Words of French derivation. You may or may not be aware that the French are at present hunting down any vestiges of Anglicisms in their language and ruthlessly expunging them."

"Well, this will show them, Floyd."

He shook his head.

"No, Charles, not just retribution." He handed me a menu. "You see, I've allowed quite a few French usages to sully my menu. This kind of thing panders to snobbery. I really can't be party to something like that." He pointed. "See here: soup du jour, entrees, pie a la mode. How insidious it is. So I am composing a new, all-American menu. We'll have today's soup, main courses, pie with ice cream, et cetera. What do you think?"

"Well, you've got a problem right at the top."

"Where?"

"Here. The word menu is, unfortunately, French."

"No problem. Bill of Fare."

"Okay, but what about French toast, French dressing, french fries, casserole, sauté, lemon meringue, frappés, croustons—hell, Floyd, what are you

going to do with something like mayonnaise?"

He mopped his forehead with the hem of his apron.

"We'll call it mayo. That sounds vaguely Irish."

"Good thing you don't serve up soufflés or filet mignon or chicken cordon bleu. Good thing the sign out front doesn't misrepresent this dump as the home of the *haute cuisine*, hey wot?"

"What would you like to eat, Charles?"

"I don't want anything to eat. I came in for the air conditioning."

"Very funny."

"Tell you what, Floyd. Just beat up some eggs, throw in some veggies and cheese, fold it over—"

He rolled his eyes. "Right. Omelette is—"

"French," I said.

He headed for the kitchen.

"Hey, Floyd, hope you don't have any chefs hanging around back there concocting marinades on the grill. Before you know it, they'll be munching eclairs and quoting Proust."

Eddie Olivera was at his desk. His white shirt was crisp, and his shoes gleamed like twin mirrors.

"Don't you ever sweat, lieutenant?"

"I knew if I just waited long enough you'd show up." He snapped shut the file he'd been studying and looked me up and down.

"You look like hell, Charles. What can I do for you?"

"Robert Strather."

Olivera shrugged. "I give up. Who's he?"

"Stiff in a fleabag over on Division Street a couple of weeks back."

"Ah yes. O.D. Left a mess for the chambermaid. Quite inconsiderate. What's your interest in Mr. Strather?"

"Cause of death."

He rocked back in his chair and laid his hands flat on the desk. Each one resembled a ham with five bananas stuck in it. Years ago, as an amateur boxer, he'd earned the nickname One Round. Rarely had an opponent lasted longer than that. On the street Eddie is accorded a great deal of respect.

"Proximate cause of death was an overdose. He ingested a large quantity of alcohol in combination with tricyclic antidepressants. The result was cardiovascular failure."

"No question about the drugs?"

"You know how we do things here, Charles. The guy croaked himself in a hotel room with no witnesses. That's a reportable

death, in case your memory has failed you."

"I've got a good memory. It's just a little short."

"Yeah. Anyway, case closed. The coroner ran toxicology tests. Booze and drugs. A stupid death. Why the interest in a homeless juicehead?"

"His sister. She says she won't rest easy until she's sure. Claims her brother never touched drugs."

"Right. And Bonnie and Clyde were terrified of guns." He opened the file. "Was there anything else?"

There wasn't. I thanked him and walked out to my car. The heat hit me like a baseball bat between the eyes.

Hyannis isn't exactly overrun with the homeless, and those who are here are less obvious than they would be in a big city because during the day they tend to stay on the move.

I finally found Willie on a bench down by the docks. He and a couple of friends were passing around a bottle and keeping an eye on the harbor. I sat on the grass nearby and watched a tour boat steam out toward Hyannisport where the gawkers would get a distant look at the Kennedy compound.

Willie noticed me and ambled over.

"Hey, Mr. Stubblefield. How's the car runnin'?"

I'd met Willie that winter. My Toyota failed to start one cold morning, and he'd helped me push it a couple of blocks to a gas station. I slipped him a couple of bucks, and since then he's looked me up a few times and touched me for a five. I always give it to him. He doesn't overdo it, and he always offers first to do odd jobs, doesn't just stick his hand out.

"Car's okay," I said. He nodded, joining me on the grass. Willie isn't a bit slow. He knew I wasn't there for the view.

"Can you give me some word on a guy named Robert Strather?"

Willie plucked a blade of grass and held it between his teeth.

"Last names aren't exactly in vogue in the circles I move in, Mr. Stubblefield. And I know several Bobs."

"This one turned in his dinner pail in a flop over on Division Street two weeks ago."

"Right. *That* Bob. Sure, I knew him. We all did. Nice guy."

"Was he doing drugs?"

"Bob? Nah. Lots of guys smokin' it or pokin' it, but far as I know, Bob stayed away from that. He was a juicer."

"Any enemies you know of?"

"Hell, no. Everybody liked him. He had a nice way about him, you know? He'd sing, play the guitar if someone had one, maybe do some magic tricks. He was an amazing magician. You can't believe the stuff he'd do with a deck of cards or a few coins. Even a cigarette or a rubber band.

"And he cared about people. He'd see some guy so drunk he was trying to walk on both sides of the street at once, and he'd get the guy settled down if he could, get him in somewhere if it was real cold. He was that kind of guy."

We sat for awhile. Two gulls squabbled over something on the roof of a trawler. A pair of tourists in identical jogging suits trotted by. They appeared to be in terrible pain.

"He told me a story once, about how he lost his last real job. He was a manager or something with the telephone company, and there was this big business meeting up in Boston. So he goes up there, and after a couple of days of these boring sessions he and another guy go out on the town and Bob gets so drunk he's got the mumbles.

"Next day he's a mess, and he falls asleep while the vice-president, or some muckety-muck, is giving a speech. Bob wakes up just as this bigwig asks a question. Not really a

question, you know—a question that didn't need an answer."

"A rhetorical question," I said.

"That's it. But here's Bob, still half-gassed, waking up in a roomful of suits, and he thinks the vice-president has just asked him a question.

"So he panics. Isn't even sure what the question was, but he jumps up and starts in with this rambling, incoherent answer. And all of a sudden it dawns on him that everyone's staring at him with funny looks on their faces and he doesn't even know what the hell he's been talking about. Said it was the most embarrassing thing ever happened to him. Next day he was called in and fired. On the spot."

"That's a terrible story."

"It is that. But Bob laughed when he told it."

"Willie, this is important. Strather wasn't using?"

He shook his head. "Nah. You can tell. Besides, he had a thing about drugs. Said they were a scourge. Thought all the dealers should be executed, thought we should strafe and bomb the Colombians, stuff like that. He rode that pony hard sometimes.

"Tell you something, though. It's a little odd that he rented a room. I mean, he might check

into a shelter on a really bitter night, but not very often, and never in warm weather."

"Did he seem depressed lately?"

Willie stared at me.

"Compared to what?"

"Right. Let me rephrase the question. Did he seem to you to be suicidal?"

He thought for a minute, chewing the grass down to a nub and spitting it out.

"No. No way. Everybody has their bad days, but suicidal? Uh-uh."

I got up and reached for my wallet. Willie shook his head.

"You always got five for me, Mr. Stubblefield, but you never seem to have any odd jobs need doing. So you keep your money in your wallet today."

"Thanks, Willie."

I watched him shuffle back to his buddies. After a couple of minutes they got up and moved on.

Willie's in his early thirties, but already he's looking used up. I have no idea why he's living on the streets, and if I think about it for very long, it fills me with a terrible sadness.

It was raining the following morning, which eased the heat a little. I didn't want to think about what it would do to the traffic: when people can't get to the beach, they go shopping.

Marcello Booking Agency occupied a space on the third floor of the Gosnold Building. Mr. Marcello was in. He was standing at the window, a thin little guy with an expression on his face like he'd just lost his last friend. I introduced myself and asked if he would mind dispensing some free advice.

"Sure. Worth every penny you pay for it, too."

"I'm trying to dig up some background on a guy named Robert Strather."

Marcello shrugged. He was beginning to remind me a little of Buster Keaton.

"Don't know him."

"It's possible he was once a magician. Figured maybe you might know a conjurer or two you could direct me to."

"I've got three on file. No Strather. He have a stage name?"

"None I know of."

Marcello nodded morosely. "An amateur." He looked out the rain-streaked window some more. I was afraid he'd break into tears any moment.

"Well, there's a bunch that meet every month over in Harwich somewhere. They don't use this agency, so I know from nothing about them. You might try asking over to the elementary school. I think they hired one of those guys in June. End-of-the-year party."

*

The secretary at the school provided me with a name and a number: Diane Wasserman, a.k.a. Calamari the Conjurer.

Thirty minutes later I was seated in Wasserman's studio, a basement room that had been outfitted as a small performance area, complete with spotlight. Wasserman sat across a felt-topped table from me, fiddling with a deck of cards.

"I knew Robert Strather. A fine man and a cardician *extra-ordinaire*. Frankly, I'm not surprised he's dead. Greatly saddened, but not surprised." She executed a complex one-handed shuffle.

"I take it you were aware of his, ah, lifestyle."

Wasserman nodded. "We all knew, and it didn't matter. You see, Bob was a very skillful conjurer. A virtual wizard with cards and coins." A triple cut with one hand. Then the other.

"But his real forte was stage illusions. Bob was also an inventor of the highest order. Through the years he developed and marketed many small tricks using coins or packets of cards. Recently they were his main source of income, as far as I know.

"It's his *grands illusions* that he will be remembered for, though, like 'Cobra' and 'Shat-

tered.' He sold several illusions to Doug Henning a number of years ago, if I'm not mistaken."

"Is that lucrative?"

"Oh my, yes. A new or improved stage illusion with strong audience impact is much sought after."

She held a card at her fingertips and made a gentle flourish; the card vanished. Her hand remained open, palm toward me. Another smooth motion and the card reappeared. I saw no place it could have gone.

"As a matter of fact, Bob was quite excited the last time I saw him. So often he was idle, you know. It was good to see him involved in a project."

"A stage illusion?" I asked. She nodded, snapping the cards open in a perfect fan.

"Naturally, he didn't divulge many details; thievery does occur in magic. But he did tell me it was a new treatment of the DeKolts Chair."

"What's that?"

"Well, it's—you understand that I can't reveal any secrets of the trade, Mr. Stubblefield. Professional ethics."

"I understand. Perhaps you could just describe to me what the audience would see."

"Certainly. A chair is brought onto the stage. An assistant sits in the chair and is covered with a sheet. When the

sheet is removed, the assistant has vanished."

"That's amazing. How do you improve something like that?"

Wasserman shrugged. "Technically, I have no idea: I'm a close-up worker. But Bob told me that he had imposed far stricter conditions than previously existed. You understand that the more stringent the conditions, the more impossible the effect appears to be. He said that his method allowed for the assistant to be covered for only, and exactly, one second. Imagine that. One second, and she's gone from a perfectly ordinary chair, in the middle of the stage." She spread her hands. "*C'est impossible, non?*"

"You ever eat at The Rudder, by any chance?"

"That gag-and-vomit place in Hyannis?" She made a face. "God, no. Why?"

"Just curious. Could I have a list of the other members of your club?"

"Ring. A group of magicians is a ring. And yes, I have a list here somewhere. There are only thirteen of us now. Rather appropriate, wouldn't you say?"

I decided to take advantage of the cooler weather and get in a workout.

One of the advantages of being self-employed is that I can

go to the dojo in the middle of the afternoon on a weekday. It's almost always empty at that time.

After stretching out, I ran through half a dozen katas, then worked on foot techniques with the big bag. Physical exercise clears the mind: meditation in action the Chinese call it.

I had a bad feeling about Strather, mainly because of his antipathy to drugs. That carries a lot of weight with me: I share his sentiment. Whether sold over the counter for pain relief or in the locker room to athletes who want to bulk up or on the street to people seeking status or escape or oblivion, drugs are bogus.

Two people in a position to know had stated that drugs were anathema to Strather. So I crossed off overdose as a cause of death.

Suicide, then. Yet the same two people flatly discounted that as well. Eddie Olivera believes that all alcoholics have a death wish, that they are consciously pursuing a course of long-term suicide. Maybe. But of the twenty-five thousand or so men who kill themselves each year, only fifteen percent use pills. Most men choose the gun.

I don't know how I'd end my life if faced with the need to do

so, but I doubt I'd drink the cocktail Strather put down. And I wasn't sure that he would either. Not voluntarily.

The Palm Garden didn't have any palm trees that I could see, and it certainly wasn't a garden spot. Faded gray asbestos siding and a couple of neon-streaked windows faced the street. The paint was peeling, and the porch listed a few degrees to port. Not a great place to die. Or to live, for that matter.

The desk clerk was a musclebound moron who looked like the survivor of a terrible genetic experiment involving tattoos. He was absorbed in a body-building magazine and didn't bother to look up.

I stood there for a minute, then banged the bell on the counter.

"Th' hell you want?"

"A little information."

He lowered the magazine and stared at me.

"This here's a hotel, Jim. You want information go see the Chamber of Commerce."

The rain had stopped, and the heat was back. It was that clammy, oppressive kind of heat that can breed discomfort and incivility.

I banged the bell again, harder. He slapped the magazine down and slowly got to his feet.

"Goddamn it, what'd I just say?"

"You said, 'Yessir, how may I be of service?'"

He leaned over the counter. "On your way before I come over there and kick your slats in."

I pulled out my wallet and laid a twenty on the desk by the registration forms.

"Too hot to dance, fella. Just a couple of easy questions and you can shake hands with Old Hickory here. Lot easier than trying on trouble that's maybe a size too big for you."

He looked me up and down some more, then nodded at the twenty.

"He had a twin brother, I hear."

"If the answers are right."

He made the bill disappear. "Go ahead, ask."

"Guy bought it here a couple of weeks back. OD. Kind of messy. You remember?"

A nod.

"You check him in?"

Another nod.

"He alone?"

"When he checked in, yeah."

"And later? Any visitors?"

Mr. Muscle shrugged. "Don't know about that. But I seen him yappin' with a guy out front that afternoon."

"Arguing?"

"Didn't say that, did I? They was just yappin'. The guy—what was his name?"

"Strather."

"Yeah, Strather. He had a bottle in a brown bag he was hittin' on. The other guy was buddying up to him, like they was old friends."

"What did the other guy look like?"

The deskman snorted. "He looked like a geek."

"Could you be a little more specific?"

"A geek! A geek, for crissake. Fat in the middle, pointy on both ends. Pencil neck, glasses, a few hairs stretched across his head on account of he's goin' bald. Looked like an ostrich or something. Pathetic."

He paused and scratched his head, loosing a flurry of dandruff.

"He wasn't broke down, though, you know. We get the juicers and the crips and the lungers and the crazies, but this guy didn't look like that. He was more of a middle-class geek."

"This guy visit Strather in his room?"

"Told you. I don't know. Can't watch all the comings and goings. I got things to do."

I checked out the decrepit furniture, the threadbare carpet, the dingy curtains. "Right. Things to do. Busy as hell, I

bet, what with all the tourists wanting a room."

He glared some more, but his mind was on dead presidents. The ones in green suits.

"Well, it's a rather uncharitable way of describing him, but yes, I guess you could say that Carl Grodin resembles an ostrich."

"Tell me about him, Ms. Wasserman."

"Call me Diane, please. You won't mind if I practice while we talk? We have a show in a week or so, and I can benefit from some finger flinging." She began making cards disappear from her fingertips again. I still couldn't figure it out.

"Carl is obsessed with magic. You may have encountered the type—birdwatchers or chess-players, say, who are similarly afflicted. They have invested their entire ego in this one thing. After a while it's no longer enough simply to see the birds and enjoy them. It becomes competition, seeing more birds than anyone else, or beating everyone at chess."

"It's compensation, of course, for never having been very good at anything else. And driven as they are, these people often become quite successful. That will not be the case with Carl, sadly. He buys every book, every video, every trick that

comes out. And he practices. But he is—I trust that you will treat this conversation as confidential—Carl is awkward, clumsy, wooden. He lacks any kind of stage persona. He is, in short, a mediocre performer at best. A magician *manqué*, if you will.

“He has to be aware of it, surrounded as he is by a number of very fine magicians. It makes him bitterly unhappy and, I’m sure, quite jealous.”

I had to ask.

“How do you do that? Make those cards vanish like that?”

Her eyes twinkled as she handed me the deck.

“Cut the cards anywhere you like, look at the card you cut to, and put it back.”

I did as she asked, cutting to the two of clubs. She assembled the cards, shuffled them a few times, and set them down.

“Watch.” She raised her left hand. Empty. Slowly, she turned it over. No card. Pulled up the sleeve of her sweater. Nothing.

“That’s odd,” she said, frowning. “I can’t seem to produce your card.” Then she brightened.

“Why, no wonder. You have your arm on it.”

I looked down. Peeking out from under my elbow was the two of clubs.

I caught Elizabeth Strather as she was leaving for work the following morning.

“I hope this won’t be upsetting to you, Ms. Strather, but did Robert leave any personal effects in the hotel room?”

“Why yes. The police released them to me several days ago. There was only the one bag, an old duffel.”

“Would it be okay if I took a look at it?”

“Of course.” She led me to a small garage painted the same shade of blue as the house.

“The garage has only been used for storage since Mom and Dad died. I rarely even go in here any more.” She unlocked a side door, and we entered the cramped space. It was filled with trunks, packing cases, and assorted junk, all of it covered with a fine layer of dust. She gestured toward the far wall.

“Dad set up a workshop here years ago. Mom and he used to argue about it because there was no room left for the car.”

“Did any of these things belong to your brother?”

She nodded. “He stored things here as well, and he had a key. But I never knew him to use it. As I said, he was quite sensitive about causing me any embarrassment.” She gave me a sidelong glance. “Have you learned anything, Mr. Stubblefield?”

"It's too soon to tell," I said. "I'd like to look through his belongings if you don't mind."

She sighed. "Stay as long as you wish. I have to go to work now. Please lock up when you go."

After she'd gone, I located the worn brown duffel bag and went through it: dirty clothes, a good pair of boots, some neatly folded winter clothes, toiletries, several magic books and magazines, and a well-thumbed anthology of modern poetry. I hefted it, and it fell open to Dylan Thomas: "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower/drives my green age . . ."

No help there.

I picked my way through the boxes to the workbench. Elizabeth had said her brother never came here. Yet one end of the bench was clear of dust, and there were fresh scraps and shavings on the floor. Someone had been working here, and with little effort I could imagine Robert waiting for his sister to leave for work, then coming in to build his models or prototypes and leaving before his sister returned home.

There was a manila folder on the bench. I flipped it open to find some articles on popular magicians and stage effects. Beneath that was what I'd

hoped to find: notes and detailed drawings of a chair.

I sat on a steamer trunk and mulled over what I had and what I might infer from it. It was pretty sketchy, but if I started with the assumption that someone had helped Strather step off, then I had a possible motive and a suspect.

All I needed now was a plan. And as I sat there amidst the junk and the gloom of Elizabeth Strather's garage, a plan suggested itself to me.

The magic show turned out to be a major convention, drawing magicians and dealers from all over the country. It had also attracted a very large audience. Eddie Olivera and I found ourselves walking sideways in order to squeeze through the hallway to the main theater room.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Olivera grumbled. "I don't even like magic. Kid stuff."

"Relax, Eddie. Force yourself to have fun. After all, the ticket's on me."

On the house, actually. I had brought Diane Wasserman in on the scheme, and she'd taken care of all the details, including the hard-to-get tickets.

"Besides," I said, "you enjoyed watching Diane and the

others at the close-up tables. Admit it."

Eddie shrugged. "No such thing as magic. It's just a game—guy's fooling me, and I have to figure out how."

"Always the copper. Whatever happened to just sitting back and enjoying the show?"

He gave me his best cynical look. "Tell me, Charles, would you devote thousands of hours of your life to learning how to stick the seven of hearts into a deck and then find it again? About as valuable as learning to burp 'The Flight of the Bumblebee' through a keyhole, isn't it? I hope the stage show is better."

"You've got no sense of wonder, Eddie," I said as we found our seats.

"Sure I do. I've been wondering all week how I let you talk me into this. It's a long shot, Charles. You'll admit that."

I had to agree. But the fact that Eddie was present meant that he at least gave some credence to my theory.

The lights dimmed, and the show began. And what a show it was. One performer after another presented miracles and impossibilities. Doves materialized from handkerchiefs and eggs from thin air. Women were placed in trunks that were then folded up to the size of a shoebox. One man ap-

peared to eat a pack of lighted cigarettes and chase it with several paper napkins. I caught Eddie smiling and applauding several times.

Finally Diane Wasserman appeared, elegantly attired in black and red. Two assistants carried a beautifully wrought wooden chair onstage. The act was billed as "Enigma."

In a nice reversal of traditional roles, Wasserman's next assistant was a slightly built man dressed in spangled white tights. He sat in the chair, and Wasserman displayed a large red sheet on both sides. She approached the chair and, with a dramatic flourish, threw the sheet over both man and chair. Almost instantaneously, before the sheet had had a chance to fully settle, she whisked it away again.

The man was gone. He had vanished in the space of a second.

The audience erupted in applause. The assistants lifted the chair and showed it to the audience from all angles. Eddie nudged me.

"That's pretty good."

"That it is. And now we have some business backstage."

We found our way back to the dressing room area. Another club member met us there and pointed to a door down the hall.

Angry voices spilled out of the room.

"How dare you! You stole my illusion. Stole it!"

The speaker of these words indeed resembled an enraged ostrich. He leaned over Diane Wasserman, redfaced and gesturing. The magician sat, hands folded, looking placidly back at her accuser.

"I have a question, Mr. Grodin," I said. He turned his baleful features on me.

"And who might you be?"

"I might be Houdini's nephew, but you can call me Mr. Stubblefield." Grodin looked confused.

"Perhaps," I continued, "you'd like to explain how the improved DeKolts Chair can be yours if Robert Strather filed for a patent two months ago."

"That's a damned lie!"

I dropped the reply I'd received from the Patent Office on the desk where he could see it.

"Sure it is. When did you last see Strather?"

"Are you a policeman?"

"Nope. He is." I jerked a thumb at Olivera. "I'm a private investigator. When did you see Strather last?"

Grodin's eyes darted around behind his glasses. Sweat had sprung out on his forehead.

"I don't remember. Quite some time ago."

"You remember where?"

He shrugged. "It must have been at one of our monthly meetings. Those are the only times I ever saw Robert. He lived on the streets, you know. He was a wastrel. A bum."

"It won't do, Grodin. We've got a witness at the Palm Garden who saw you with Strather the day he died. We've got the patent. The cops have a perfect thumbprint from the hotel room. And it won't take long to locate the source of your antidepressants." The part about the thumbprint wasn't true, but it had the desired effect. Grodin folded up like a deflated beach ball, all the bluster gone out of him.

"I demand to have a lawyer present before I answer any more questions."

Eddie stepped up to take charge.

"We'll be happy to accommodate you, Mr. Grodin. Right this way."

Floyd had his new menu. Another blow struck for *égalité*. He had a new sign over the coffee machine, too: "Bad coffee is grounds for divorce." I wondered how many times Floyd had been married.

Elizabeth Strather took a tiny bite of her blueberry muffin. At that rate it would last until Labor Day.

"Grodin was a frustrated magician. He got wind of the new illusion, undoubtedly from someone in the club. And he decided it should be his. Fame and fortune and all that.

"So he buddied up to your brother, probably bought him a bottle, gave him some money to rent the room. This is all conjecture, of course, unless Grodin confesses, which is unlikely. But I figure he told Robert he had some big-time connections and could help him sell the chair illusion to one of the major acts. Once in the room, he got the drugs to your brother: in food, in the booze, who knows. He figured everyone would write it off as an OD."

"What an awful man." The muffin lay forgotten on its saucer.

"Grodin got the plans for the chair from the duffel: Diane Wasserman is quite certain that Robert carried a copy with him. The original set was in the garage. Wasserman and some other members of the club used them to construct the effect in time for the show so we could spring it on Grodin. He had neither the time nor the ability to prepare it in so short a time. When he saw it being performed on stage, he lost it. His

big chance was being taken away from him."

She toyed with the muffin, then pushed it away.

"What now?" she asked.

"Well, the case against Grodin is only circumstantial, but the D.A. is going ahead with it. We'll just have to see."

"And the chair?"

"The club wants you to assume ownership of the chair. It should be worth some money."

I could see her thinking that over. Judging from her modest circumstances, the money would be welcome.

Finally she said, "The people in the magic club, they were very generous in helping us."

I said they had been.

She thought some more.

"Would you be willing to discuss with them the possibility of setting up some kind of scholarship fund, or some such thing, for young people who are interested in magic? That seems like a good use for Robert's invention."

I told her I would. She checked her watch, said she was late for work, kissed me on the cheek, and was gone.

Floyd's air conditioner felt good, so I stayed for another cup of coffee. It wasn't bad at all.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Stray observations. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the July Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

October Hearts

Gene KoKayKo

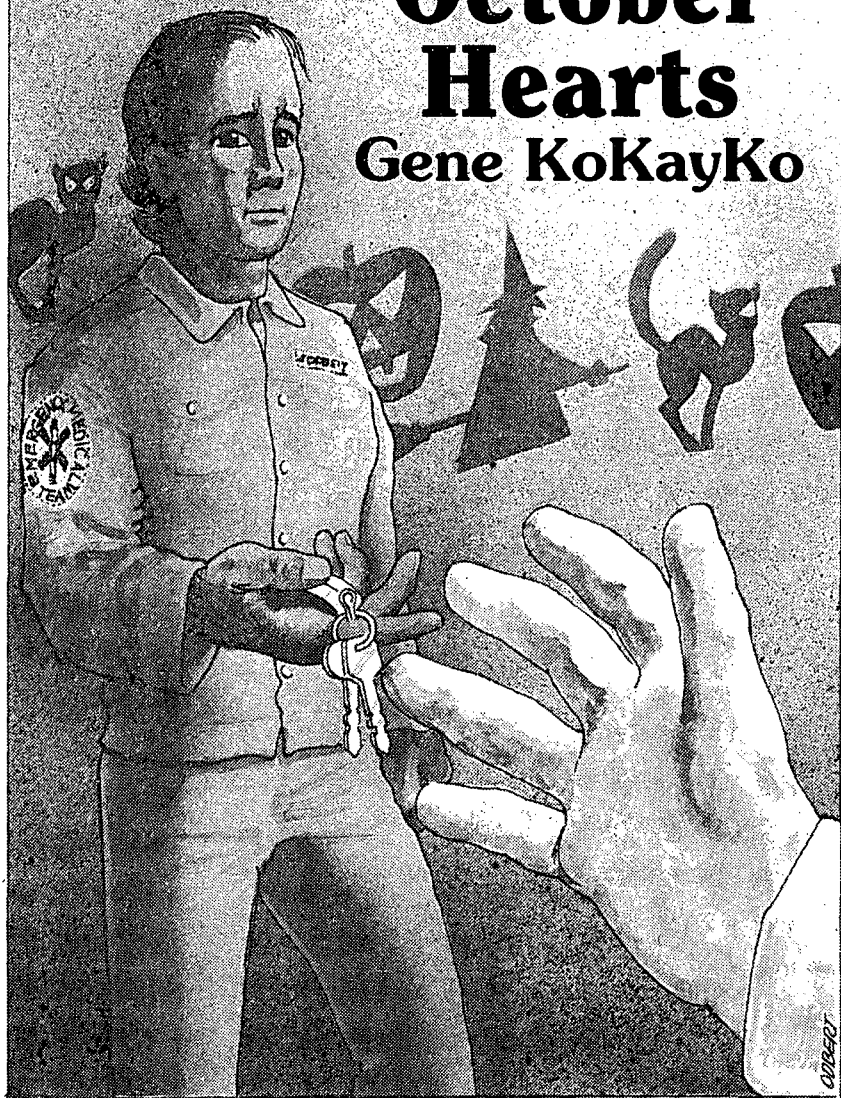


Illustration by Jim Odbert

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The back of Rube's house was almost another world. If he shut his senses down, he could imagine a primordial existence, with just him and the big old dog and his flowerbed. If he shut his ears enough to ignore the light traffic sounds from Main Street a half block away, and if he kept his eyes from the contrails of big jets connecting L.A. and San Francisco (they streaked the sky), then he could hear the creek as it babbled its way to the ocean. And the big tree made sounds, too, a wispy, rubbing sound where its limbs bumped the old stucco house. The wind frayed the tree's leaves, murmuring along with the creek, while Rube ignored the traffic and the contrails and patted fresh earth around his early carnations and heartsease.

Now, this was retirement. He had his hands deep in the rich, black soil, the feel of it wonderful and cool on his forearms, when the big yellow Lab went mad inside the house.

He could hear the dog moving from one room to the other, his huge paws clumping more than skittering across the hardwood floors. When he barked, it was like a cannon going off, a deep-throated belch that made Rube wince. "Jesus Holy Jehoshaphat, what now?"

The dog never barked except when he was inside the house. On walks, Buddy grinned. Or sniffed. Or snorted, almost like a horse. But only in the house did he—

Rube heard it then, over the cannon-fire bark: a rapping like a woodpecker—repetitive and insistent—on his front door.

"Around in back!" he shouted, drawing his hands from the rich earth.

He could gauge the intruder's progress by the thumping footsteps of the dog inside.

Sheriff Boggert's big face came around the house ahead of the man. "Rubekowski. Where are you?"

Rube was squatting down, of course, to plant. He was short anyway, and scrunched down on his haunches with the garden around him, he was almost invisible.

"I'm right here, John. Right in front of you. Stop yelling."

"Oh, yeah, sorry." Boggert grinned like a bulldog, Rube thought. Only bulldogs were prettier.

"You're doin' it, huh? Plantin' that garden."

Rube had compost and soil almost to his elbows and his back deck was littered with garden tools.

"Yeah, I'm doing it," he said. Though it was obvious.

"How's the horse?"

Rube grinned. "Buddy's fine. Except he barks when people knock on my door."

"He's supposed to—he's a watchdog."

The kind, Rube knew, who would let burglars in, then kill them with affection. Through the patio's glass doors, Rube could see the big Labrador standing now, with his paws high up on the glass. "I just washed those."

Boggert hunkered down beside Rube and looked the plot over. "You might wanna be careful about how close you plant the carnations and the heartsease," he said, "One'll steal the life from the other."

Rube felt like telling him to tend his own garden, as Boggert had once told him, but he held his tongue and just nodded. "I read the instructions carefully."

"Well, you know, it takes more'n a few instructions to grow a good garden."

Rube stared at him.

"It takes a certain touch," Boggert added.

"Uh-huh."

Hunkered down like they were, Rube thought they'd make a great ad for Weight Watchers, in the "before" group. Boggert had a well-fed look to his frame, a lot of flesh that draped large bones. Rube was smaller framed, and his

gut was starting to recede. He could even see past it now, to the ground below.

"I need a favor," Boggert said.

His voice had softened, and Rube looked from his hearts-ease to Boggert's face in surprise.

"What kind of favor?"

"Well, two, actually."

Rube patted at the base of the plants. "Go on. I'm listening."

"Dillon, my deputy, is on vacation this week and next. And..." Boggert pulled a sheaf of posters from a back pocket. "I've got these pictures to post. I thought, the way you and Buddy walk all over town, that maybe you'd nail a few to poles and storefronts and such, in obvious places where the tourists would see them."

Rube took a poster from Boggert's big hand. "Missing," it said. "Have you seen this child?" There was a picture of a dark-haired girl of indeterminate age. Rube read: "Tammy Martin. Age fifteen. Last seen wearing jean cutoffs and a pink tank top leaving her home in Morro Bay, heading north, on October 15, 1994." Over a week ago, he realized.

"Sure, I'll put 'em up." Rube took a handful of the posters. "And?"

"This one's personal. You probably won't do it."

"Don't be coy, John. It doesn't suit you."

Boggert's eyes slitted, but his mouth crinkled at the corners in a grin. "You're right, it don't. I want you to attend my granddaughter's Halloween party."

"As a chaperon?"

"No," Boggert said. "As the town hero."

Rube glanced quickly at the big man's eyes, looking for meanness. But Boggert was serious, Rube could see that. He didn't know how to react.

"I—I . . ."

"Oh, come on, Rube. You solved the first murder this town has seen in years. True, you shouldn't have. True, it was an accident, and if you'd fallen in the water, you woulda drowned. True, you should have waited for me to question the man . . . but even so."

"I'm not a hero," Rube said.

"Town thinks so. Haven't you noticed?"

What Rube had noticed but was trying to forget were the nightmares. He'd be so tired after walking away the day with Buddy he'd crawl into bed early, sometimes before the sun went down, and he'd fall right off to sleep. But then the twitchiness would start, somewhere in the middle of the dream. He'd see himself crawl-

ing around on that old fishing boat, the fog so thick he could barely see, and he'd hear Buddy whining and that awful thwack of hard wood against the dog's skull, the captain's voice raving, "You followed me, didn't you—you're a bad dog, as bad as that bitch that tried to steal my son's life from the sea, my boat from me . . ."

And Rube would wake clutching something, something he wanted to stop, to take back, but something already done, a spear already hurled. The one he'd killed the captain with, in self-defense.

"What would I have to do?" he asked.

Boggert toyed with the dirt and moved a little more around the heartsease. "Oh, nothing much. It's just a little ol' party this Friday for a few kids at the Vets Hall. Maybe a little talk on Halloween when you were a kid, how things have changed, maybe tell them a story or two."

"Jesus, Boggert, I don't know how to do that. I'm not an entertainer."

Boggert rolled his eyes. "How hard can it be? They're just kids. And we're afraid to let 'em trick-or-treat. Even in this town. Too damned many nuts hidden away in all the corners of our lives, you know? This is their Halloween party."

Rube hesitated.

Boggert rushed on. "It's really important to Sara Jane. I promised her something special and—"

"Okay."

Boggert grinned wide, his eyes lighting like a child's.

"You won't regret it, Rube."

But he would. More than he ever could have imagined on that sunny day in late October, when all there was in the world was a garden and a big old dog and a tree that moaned in the breeze behind his house.

Of course Buddy had to go along. The big dog was traumatized by the death of his earlier owners, and he wouldn't let Rube go anywhere alone. When Rube tried, Buddy set to howling like a banshee, and the neighbors complained.

Well, they never had really, but Rube couldn't help it. It broke his heart to hear the dog wail, and he always relented. After scolding and soothing talks, which the dog seemed to understand, Rube would get maybe three paces out the door and the wailing would begin. Such a mournful, pitiful sound that Rube always went back and opened the door and said, "Come on, Buddy." And the dog would grin—Rube would swear he did—the big face stretched and his huge ivory teeth gleam-

ing. His tail, careworn and chewed from some past mishap, would start to move like a great metronome.

Man and his dog, Rube would think as they plodded along. On the central coast of California, where the tourists played and the sun sometimes shone.

The day of the party was foggy. An onshore wind had mingled with a heavy marine layer, and the wispy stuff held the town in a lacy grip.

Even so, the tourists were out. Like flocks of slow-moving gulls they haunted the sidewalks in front of the gift and art shops. Buddy parted the way, his great head like the prow of a noble ship. Rube stayed close on his tail and let Buddy lead. Some jumped, startled by a dog of such magnitude, but no one complained.

The crowds thinned as they ran out of sidewalk between the east and west villages and they were forced to walk the shoulder of the road. Cars whizzed by. Buddy marched alone and only occasionally strayed into traffic.

"Buddy!" Rube would shout, and the big dog would fall back to the shoulder with a sad look at the car he might have slowed down if only Rube weren't there.

The Vets Hall was on the edge of the west village, a som-

ber, maroon stucco building with flags that flew from a tall steel pole. Voices drifted down the stairs as they approached, high and giggling and full of innocence—not yet veterans of anything but childhood.

Rube stood in the doorway and peered in. The big main room was decorated with balloons that dipped from the ceiling beams. Cut-out scarecrows and skeletons and cardboard black cats prowled the walls. Tables were set with food and drink, and a big barrel filled with apples that bobbed red and green in cold-looking water held the place of honor in the very center. A line had formed at the barrel, and three children were already around it, dipping their heads to bob for apples.

“Mr. Rubekowski?”

She was about Rube’s age, her hair gray and long, falling upon a slim neck. She beamed at him as she crossed the room. “We’re so glad you’re here,” she said. “I’m Eva Surbol, the committee chairperson.”

Buddy wagged his great baton of a tail.

“Stay, Buddy.”

Rube walked toward her, a grin on his own face.

Eva took him by the arm and led him toward the front of the room. There was a speaker’s dais, and Rube felt his heart

lurch. He’d hated public speaking in college, had always dreaded it at work, had always felt the worm of fear turn his stomach to mush at the very thought. They’re just children, Boggert had chided him.

By the speaker’s lectern stood two more adults. Eva said, as they approached, “Jenny and Thomas, my committee members.” Rube shook hands with both, bobbing his head. Smiling. Feeling not so much social as foolish. Eva pointed at the lectern. “It’s all yours.

“Children, pay attention!” she said as he mounted the podium.

Like walking the last mile. He dug in his shirt pocket for the little prepared speech. But then, seeing all those bright little faces in their Halloween costumes, he decided to fake it.

“When I was a little boy,” he began—

And that’s when the child screamed.

Rube, with his weird sense of perception in a crisis, saw Buddy leaning in through the door, looking curious. He saw children around the apple barrel looking frightened. He heard a terrible sound as the barrel went over, the chubby boy, apple still in hand, going over with it, both crashing hard on the floor. The breeze from

their falling stirred the balloons, and the cardboard cat along the wall waffled as though it had suddenly come alive.

Eva moved first. She reached the downed child and held his head up from the hard floor. "My God, Robert. Are you badly hurt?" She seemed to be checking his exposed knees and arms for blood and cuts.

The boy held his stomach in obvious agony. Drool hung from his lips, and he made an awful, gargling sound deep in his throat. Rube unfroze, jumped down from the dais, and ran to Eva's side.

"Lean him back," Rube said. "Lay him down so he can breathe. Maybe he choked on a chunk of apple."

They stretched Robert out, or tried, but the boy kept clawing at his stomach with his free hand. He rolled to his side, muttering, then vomited all over the Vets Hall floor.

"Keep him on his side," Rube said, "or he'll choke." He rubbed the boy's back until the spasms ceased.

There was a sheen to Robert's skin, a palpable sweat that bloomed from each pore. His breathing was shallow and rapid, and he was flushed. Even worse, though, were his eyes. They were wide and dilated, as if fixed on some scene

that only he could see. He watched the walls of the Vets Hall in shock and horror, as though the cardboard cat had sprouted real claws and teeth and was after him.

"Gonna get me," he said, his voice slurry and edged with panic.

"No, it's not, nothing's here but us. You're all right." Rube rubbed the boy's tense back.

Robert hunched, the muscles almost convulsive. Then he screamed again and started to claw the floor.

"Call an ambulance," Rube told Eva. "Looks like poison of some type. He seems to be hallucinating."

"Oh my God," Eva wailed, but she was up from the floor and moving toward the wall phone before the words died.

Rube held the boy. He was about eight, Rube figured. And though he was chubby and wore shorts, there was something aged about him, as though, realizing he was poisoned, he'd become jaded and fearful all in one stroke.

Against the wall the children had retreated, huddled in a frightened line. Except for ashen faces, they looked well enough. But then a tiny blonde girl began to wail. She clutched at her stomach and retched all over the girl next to her. That started a reaction in another

boy, who fell to his knees before being sick.

"Jesus Jehoshaphat," Rube swore. "Hurry with that damned ambulance, will you?"

But Eva was still across the room, muttering furiously into the phone. Rube held Robert close to him, the boy's wet face soaking into Rube's shirt. There went the speech, Rube thought. He stared down into his pocket to see the pages stuck together with Robert's tears. Well, he hadn't liked the speech much anyway.

"They're on their way from the east village station," Eva said, running up to him. Her hard, practical shoes made a solid noise on the wood floor. "What can I do?"

Just then the little girl started to wail again. None of the other adults or attending parents had moved. Rube recoiled when he finally recognized the small blonde girl as Boggert's granddaughter—Sara Jane—the girl who'd been promised a special treat at her Halloween party.

"Help the kids along the wall. Hold them. Make sure they can breathe." Rube paused, trying to think of first aid procedures, but somehow all the things he'd learned in a lifetime had fled him. It's because they're children, he told himself.

"Move, Buddy."

Rube looked up to see the paramedics coming through a shaft of late afternoon sunlight that filled the open door.

"Thank God," he said.

At his voice, Buddy whined and lifted his big head from his paws. He stumbled to his feet and rubbed against the door sill. Finally he couldn't stand it a moment longer and trotted in behind the paramedics.

They both reached Rube together as he rocked Robert in his arms. Robert was babbling again, half-sobs and little beginnings of screams about the things coming from the wall.

"It's okay," Rube soothed, trying to hold him still. Buddy's tail thumped on the wood floor as if to agree; he whined when Robert whimpered.

A paramedic touched Rube's shoulder as the rest moved about. "I'll take him now."

Rube didn't want to let go, though, had to will his fingers to loosen on the boy's shoulders.

"What did you see?" the paramedic asked. "What were his symptoms?"

Rube tried to get the order straight. "He screamed, then fell over, pulling the apple barrel over as he went. Then he threw up. There must have been quite a bit of pain. He doubled over on the floor. By the time I reached him, he was

sweating profusely and his muscles were rigid. I think he may have convulsed, but I'm not positive."

"Sounds chemical," the medic said. "Like a drug reaction."

Rube remembered the barrel then, full of bright green and red apples. The children had been bobbing. Nipping apples from the dark water, then taking bites from the fruit. Robert had half eaten his apple; Rube had seen him do it. Half consciously he'd seen it as he spoke with Eva.

"Poisoned apples," he said to himself. The medic frowned at him as Rube said it. "Or the water. I have to check—"

More paramedics came through the door, with Sheriff John Boggert hot on their tails, his big gut leading the way, bumping them along. He ran full steam into a group of parents milling together, blocking his way.

"Who called for paramedics? What's going on here?" he shouted to be heard above the din of frightened children and parents. But Rube saw that even as he fielded answers from hysterical adults, he was pushing through them, his eyes scanning the room for Sara Jane. Eva Surbol half rose from her kneeling position at Sara

Jane's side, and the movement drew Boggert's attention.

Rube was watching Boggert when the sheriff located his granddaughter. On the floor. In a pool of vomit, gripping herself with fine, thin arms, curled up in a tiny ball. The sheriff's dark bulldog face darkened even more, then went white as he headed for his only living relative.

Rube was so intent on his friend's face he didn't see that the water had spread from the overturned barrel into Boggert's path. Neither did Boggert. At full steam he hit the water, and his feet went out from under his considerable bulk.

Instead of throwing his hands out to catch his fall, the big man clutched his chest as he hit the hardwood floor of the hall. His face was now ash gray. "Sheriff Boggert needs help," Rube said to the medic attending Robert. "I think he just had a heart attack."

The attendant glanced at the fallen man as Rube headed for him and shouted, "Adamson, get the sheriff!"

Rube reached him first. Even as he tried to make Boggert lie on his back, the sheriff was hollering at him. "How could this happen, Rubekowski? Why in God's name would anyone hurt

my child! Tell me what happened!"

The words shook Rube to the bone.

"I—I had just walked through the door," he said. "Didn't even get time to give my speech." The answer sounded stupid and defensive, but he felt responsible somehow.

The attendant gently edged Rube out of the way and knelt to check the sheriff's heart rate. But as Rube started to move away, Boggert's big hand shot out to catch hold of him, the effort causing the sheriff to gasp in pain.

"Take it easy, sheriff. We'll have you at the hospital in no time at all. Just take it easy." The paramedic obviously didn't know the sheriff well.

John Boggert tightened his grip on Rube and met his eyes. With a visible effort, he spoke.

"By the authority vested in me by the State of California, the County of San Luis Obispo, I deputize you and give you the same authority of any deputy sheriff in this county. Get to work, Rubekowski."

Rube just stared at him. "John, you're not feeling well. You can't do this. It's insane—what will Dillon say?"

"He's on vacation," Boggert said, and glared at the men who were trying to lift him onto

a stretcher. "Find out who did it."

"Sara Jane will be fine, sheriff," the second paramedic said. "She's going in the first ambulance with the little boy. You'll be in the next one right after her. If you let us lift you."

The men shifted the sheriff to the stretcher, and Boggert shut his eyes in pain.

It sent Rube hurtling backwards, that pain, the awful responsibility his friend had just laid upon him. Find out? He was no good at this type of thing, not good with people. He hadn't solved the other crime. Buddy had. He wasn't a detective, he was a retired chemist.

He remembered where he'd been headed when Boggert came into the auditorium. The overturned barrel was still there, the water more spread out than ever, the apples wet and shiny under the harsh fluorescent lights. As he crouched beside the barrel, he saw there were apples and a splash of water still inside. One apple was green, the other two were red, all looking like ordinary apples.

Rube looked around for something to put them in and spied an empty plastic sandwich bag. It had been tossed on the floor like an afterthought, and Rube scooped it up, then dug the apples and some of the water from the barrel. The bag

was watertight enough. Carefully he tied the top and stood up, ready to take the bag like an offering to Boggert.

But the sheriff was gone, as were most of the children. Rube went out the front door to the parking lot. Buddy was whining at the doorway, upset over all the activity and crying children. He followed Rube to an ambulance, where Rube found the head paramedic giving instructions to the driver. Rube tapped him on the shoulder.

"You have to give this to the doctor in charge," he said, handing him the bag. "At the hospital. Tell him to get it to the lab for analysis."

"What is it?" he asked, hesitating before touching it.

"Poisoned apples, I think."

"Jesus Christ," said the driver next to them, but the paramedic just nodded and took the bag.

"I have something for you, too," he said, nodding towards another ambulance that was pulling out of the driveway, hitting the street with sirens blaring. "The sheriff told me to give these to you." He placed something cold in Rube's hand before running for a third ambulance, getting inside, and starting the motor.

Rube opened his hand to find the keys to Boggert's police Jeep. He looked down at the

grinning dog and shook his head.

"He doesn't even know if I can drive," Rube muttered. Buddy didn't answer directly, just turned around and headed back towards the auditorium. After a moment's pause, Rube sighed and followed.

A few of the children remained, along with their parents and those adults who'd had no children of their own present. Someone had righted the apple barrel and had fetched rags to throw on the water on the floor. Rube sighed. It was just as well he was the only "official" person on the scene. Deputy Dillon would have had a fit with the way the locals had tampered with crime scene evidence. But Rube had it all in his memory, the location of the barrel, the lineup of children waiting their turn to bob for apples, and those gathered around it when he started to speak.

Rube searched the room for and found Eva Surbol, dealing with the remaining parents; they appeared to be looking for someone to blame things on. As committee chair, Eva was taking her portion. He was glad to go to her rescue.

"Excuse me, Ms. Surbol, but I need to ask you some questions," Rube said in his best Deputy Dillon voice. As Eva

looked at him, startled and amused, Buddy inserted himself bodily between Rube and the angry parent.

"Thank you," Eva said as they withdrew to the refreshment table. "Mr. Wenkins is threatening to sue me for endangering the children, and himself, of course. What questions do you have, Rube? May I call you Rube?"

"Of course," he said. "I need to know where the apples came from. Where did you buy them? How were they delivered? Who set up the barrel, and who put the water in the barrel?"

He was watching her face as he asked, and saw the eyes and mouth waver before she got hold of herself. She was upset, more than she appeared, but wasn't the type to let go in public. Maybe when she got home she'd break down, but not here. Rube knew how it felt, how hard it was to do, and admired her. He also saw she wasn't expecting that many questions from him.

"We didn't buy the apples. We had writeups in the paper weeks before the party, telling the town about it, asking for donations. There's nothing in the budget for a Halloween party, so very little was bought. The punch was donated by the grocery store, the paper plates, cups, and napkins by the office

supply, cookies by various mothers, and the apples... well, we needed a lot of apples. We used them in the apple bobbing, made a ton of candied apples, and the overripe ones were used for the games. The 'throw an apple and knock a ghost over' booth was going great." Eve gestured to the corner behind them, and Rube saw a gnarled old man picking up white napkin ghosts off of empty tin cans. There was a box of apples on the floor for the ammunition.

"We asked for apple donations, and we had three people volunteer. Catherine Telyn has an actual apple orchard and provided most of them; Greg Anders has a ranch with different fruit trees, and Rose Marie Mitchem has a lot of acreage with gardens and trees. They're all locals. They volunteered over the last two weeks, and I called them the day before yesterday asking that they drop the apples off at the back of the Vets Hall no later than noon today."

She paused and looked around the hall. "The barrel was already here. In the smaller auditorium there's a stage, and different clubs and groups put on performances there and have square dancing. The barrel is used as a prop for lots of things. A table, an auc-

tion stand—you name it. I got here at ten with Jenny and Thomas and other volunteers and started putting things up. Jacob is the groundskeeper here, and he was in charge of filling the barrel with water. He said he had to half fill it out back, then bring it in on a dolly before it was too heavy to move. He spread a plastic cloth on the floor to protect the floor from spills . . . didn't help much, did it? Anyway, that's the last I saw directly. I was so busy I didn't actually see how the rest was done. When I had a moment to check, it was in place, filled with water and apples. You'll have to talk with Jacob."

Rube nodded. "Who invited the children to the party, or was it an open house type of thing?"

Her mouth tightened before she spoke. "No, we sent invitations to the children. Making it seem special so they'd all come. I did that. Ran off the invitations on my computer, with graphics, and inserted the names at top. Jenny, Thomas, and I addressed all the envelopes and mailed them over a week ago. I was in charge of the invitations."

"Based on what?" Rube asked.

She hesitated just a beat before understanding what he meant. "Based on school enroll-

ments in the Cambria district. All the children enrolled at the elementary level were invited. The junior high is having their own party tomorrow. Or were."

"Did they all show up?"

"Uh . . . wait . . . I'm not sure. Not everyone had shown up before . . . this happened. But they all RSVP'd yes, except three children who were going out of town with their families."

"I'd like the list of children invited, and the names and addresses of the people who supplied the apples. What about the water? Did you use anything special?" Rube asked.

She shook her head. "No, just the faucet water from the hose. And don't start about Cambria water. I have the list of the children invited in my purse, and the names of people who donated the apples—I intended to thank them publicly later on—but I don't have the addresses with me. They may be in the phone book, but I don't know. Can I get them to you in the morning?"

"Can't you get them for me tonight?" Rube saw her hesitate.

"I'll call you later and give them to you. But now I'd really like to head out to the hospital," Eva said.

"Does that fall under committee head responsibility?" Rube asked her.

"No," she said. "It falls into the category that one of the children taken ill was my nephew."

Rube still hadn't thought of an adequate reply by the time she'd left him standing there alone with Buddy. He was squirming at his own stupidity when he looked up to see an old man enter the auditorium with a mop. He was incredibly thin, almost a mate to the mop handle, with craggy features and deep-set eyes. Rube headed towards him, trying to avoid the water.

"Jacob?"

"Uh-huh," he answered.

"Uh—Sheriff Boggert asked me to look into what happened here today. Ms. Surbol said you set up the barrel of apples. What time did you get here, and were the apples already here? Where were they? Did you see anything unusual about them?"

"T'were sittin' there when I got to work. Out back a the hall."

"Sitting there . . . how?" Rube asked.

"Apples in boxes, apples in crates. They'd been sittin' there, so I hosed 'em off first to clean 'em up. The barrel had been hauled out the day before, and I rinsed that out, too."

"You cleaned the barrel?" Rube asked.

The old man looked at him like he was a card short of a full deck. "That's what I just said. I used the hose. There ain't nothing wrong with it, people drink from it all the time."

He made to turn away, so Rube put his hand out to touch Jacob's elbow, but the man moved away from the contact.

"No one else touched the apples but you after that then?"

"I didn't say that, mister. Missus Cranek pulled up and took some of the apples to make them candied. She said she had the caramel heatin' on 'er stove, so she was in a hurry. Then Thomas came out and had me help him pick out the mooshy ones to use for throwing at milk bottles and cans and such."

Rube tried another tactic. "Could you tell me how the apples were originally divided: the types and whose they were —"

"Jesus, mister. They was just apples. We got apple trees all over out here."

The hostility in the old gardener's voice was obvious. At first Rube thought he hated being questioned, but with a chilling jolt Rube realized there was hatred in old Jacob's eyes. And it had nothing to do with apples.

"What's on your mind, Jacob?"

"I'm just taking a good hard look at the man who killed my friend. That's all."

Rube's mouth fell open and he started to say something in his own defense, but by then the old gardener had turned his back, thrown down the mop, and was walking off.

Well, Rube thought, heading outside to the Jeep, you were wrong on one count, Sheriff Boggert. Not everyone thinks I'm a hero.

Sitting in the Jeep, he petted Buddy and started the engine. With several false starts and stops, he got the car on the road and headed back to the east village. Rube kept his eyes straight ahead, not wanting to see any of the looks passersby might be giving him. He hadn't driven in fifteen years, and he was rusty.

He made it safely down his driveway and, getting out of the Jeep, paused to draw a breath. Buddy took off towards the front door, his supper the only thought in his head. No worries about poisonings, about deaths current and past to cloud his mind. Sometimes Rube envied Buddy.

"Hold on, partner, you still can't open doors without me." Rube put the Jeep keys in his pocket and fished out the house keys. As soon as he entered the house, the quiet of the stucco

walls smoothed away some of the stress gathering in his shoulders. Glancing at the clock, he hesitated.

"It's still too early for your dinner, Buddy-boy. There's almost an hour's light left, and I'm not going to waste it."

Rube took off his speech-giving clothes, put on his old Dockers and flannel shirt, and went out into his garden. With his hands in the earth, his head bowed down, he tried to let the stress flow out of him. Children poisoned, his best new friend in the hospital, and he newly deputized. And he'd thought his retirement would be quiet and boring.

When it grew too dark to see what he was doing, he went back inside, washing hands and arms in the kitchen sink. He was opening the deck door for ventilation when the phone rang.

"Mr. Barney Rubekowski?"

"That's right."

"This is Dr. Wentworth, from General Hospital."

Rube's heart raced. Boggert had died, or one of the children was worse, or . . .

"I just got the report on the apples and water samples." The doctor's voice was clear and concise. "Do you have any idea what the lab came up with on the material you gave to the paramedic?"

Rube remembered Robert twitching and sweating and muttering. "Some powerful hallucinogenic?" he ventured.

There was only the smallest of pauses before the doctor replied. "Lysergic acid amide. But in a strange form."

Rube waited, his hand sweating on the receiver, not in surprise, but having his worst fears realized. When the doctor didn't continue quickly enough, he said, "Flower seeds?"

This time the pause was even longer. "Yes. How did you know that?"

"I'm—I used to be a chemist," Rube said.

"Well, this lysergic was concentrated in the water, mostly. The lab boys think it was from crushed plants or flower seeds of some kind: a few seeds are a viable source of the drug. Morning glories or Hawaiian Rose seeds would do it. But the apples—" The doctor paused as though he didn't want to think about it. "There was a toxic dose of pesticide in two of the apples we checked. The rest were clear."

"Nasty," Rube whispered.

"And intentional," the doctor said. "I could see someone accidentally getting flower seeds in the water, but the apples were dosed. Probably with a liquid insecticide inserted with a syringe."

Rube didn't know what to say to that. "How are the children?"

"Fine now. Except for Robert. He'll have some lasting brain damage, I'm afraid. We don't know how bad the long term effects will be yet."

"And Sheriff Boggert?"

"Resting. I have him sedated. Against his will, I may add."

"Was it serious?"

"The heart attack? Always. But no, he'll be okay with rest and a new diet. And more exercise."

"I'll let him walk my dog when he gets out," Rube said.

"You do that." Another pause. "Do you have any idea who did this to the children?"

"Not a clue."

"From what the sheriff and his granddaughter said, I thought you had more information. The sheriff said you were working on the case, and Sara Jane was telling the nurses at dinnertime that you and your associate would solve it in no time. I thought perhaps you had seen or heard something they didn't tell the police officer here at the hospital."

The doctor was obviously fishing, but Rube was sidetracked.

"My associate? What associate?"

"Well, the one Sara Jane kept talking about. Someone named Buddy. She was telling

the nurses that Buddy would visit her tomorrow. Are you there, Mr. Rubekowski?"

He must have heard the noise Rube had made. Rube stared at the receiver before speaking. "Yes, but I have to go now. My associate wants his dinner." He hung up the phone. "Isn't that right, Buddy?"

His associate just grinned and thumped his tail.

Rube sat up abruptly, the sheet jammed against his mouth to stifle his sob.

The dreams. He'd never be rid of the dreams.

The old man's accusation gnawed at him. He'd killed the captain in self-defense; the man was standing above him with a belaying pin. He was sure, at the time, that the captain had killed Betty Sturgis. But when Rube asked the man as he lay dying, he only grinned.

Now the captain's death haunted him.

He couldn't help wondering if there was such a thing as a town jinx. The village had been such a peaceful place until Rube showed up. Or so they all told him.

"You killed a friend of mine." The words echoed in his mind.

Like he killed his wife?

Unbidden, the thoughts came with the dream echoes,

and Rube looked at the side of the bed that was empty; had been for years.

Near the very end Elechia was in so much pain. Their lives had become a torment. Good days were those she could still make it to the bathroom by herself. Bad days were a rolling, writhing agony. Like a child in bed with a demon, she would scream and scream and scream for the pain to stop. When it didn't, she would scream for Rube to stop it.

Help me, she said.

I can't, he said.

Please, if you love me, make this end.

Oh my God, if he loved her? Hadn't he always loved her, as long as he could remember?

Elechia the strong. Elechia the brave. Had always been, of the two of them. She'd always been the stronger, the one more able to face the cruel things in life. The ups and downs that would send Rube scurrying for cover only made Elechia stiffen her spine and try harder. She'd been the one who pushed him to get his doctorates. She'd been the one who made the budget work when there was barely enough money for that first New York apartment. Nothing frightened her. Not the rats in the hallway or the cockroaches beneath the refrigerator or the pain of losing.

Nothing until the cancer spread to her pancreas and liver. And that didn't frighten her, just tormented her. She was bone and skin through with life, and still the disease wouldn't put her away. Rube thought, later, that it was his watching that drove her to ask. His seeing her skinned down to the soul of agony.

And who else could she ask?

Who else should she ask?

His to hold and his to love and his to . . .

You murdered my friend, the old man had said.

He'd awakened one night in the middle of darkness with Eleshia huddled beside him. She had formed her thin body into a knot that looked like a sick child hugging chin to knees. She was whimpering in pain, little gasps that ripped his heart out of his chest. He straightened her out on the bed and stroked her head, then injected her with a lethal dose of Dilaudid and barbiturates.

She went away from him softly, like a flower closing its petals one final time. She smiled. She started to speak, then shook her head as though there were no words left that mattered. She died quietly in his arms.

Nothing like Robert's spasms on the hardwood auditorium floor, or the way the captain

had looked, pinned to his own deck, his life bleeding away into the ocean.

So much death and hurt. Who was to say which was rightful and which illegal? But John Boggert had decided—had sworn Rube in as his deputy. Told him to find out who had hurt the children, who had poisoned Robert, Sara Jane, and the others. Who had indirectly put Boggert in the hospital.

Rube lay down, slipping back into fitful dreams; in his old chemistry lab he kept making mistakes and putting poisons into medicine bottles. He gave up at dawn, getting up and showering, getting dressed, and making coffee.

Opening his front door to get the paper, he found the note taped to the welcome mat.

"Rube: here are the names and addresses you asked for. I hope they help. I also hope nothing comes of it. Eva."

She'd come sometime in the night and left the note, not knocking or announcing her presence. Not wanting to speak to him. Had Jacob the gardener spoken to others of his feelings about Rube? Did Eva agree? Think him a meddlesome outsider?

Rube realized just how much he wanted to belong here. He wanted this to be home. He

turned off the coffeepot and picked up Boggert's keys from the counter.

Catherine Telyn and her husband had the apple orchards, so Rube decided to visit them first. Taking the inland road, he found seagulls replaced by blackbirds and blue jays. The road was smoothly paved, the ranch's corral-like front gates were open. Rube pulled into the courtyard in front, barely getting out of the way of a truck that barreled past him on the way out.

As he got out of the Jeep, four people came out of the house all making for a station wagon. Rube hurried to intercept a young woman.

"Excuse me, but I'm looking for Catherine Telyn."

The blonde gave him a short glance before answering, "She's not here."

"Can you tell me where to find her?" Rube persisted.

One of the men in the car called out, "Come on, Jill."

Jill tried to push Rube out of the way. "She's at General Hospital where we're trying to go if you'll move out of the way, mister. What do you want with Mom?"

Rube halfway looked around for Buddy but realized he had to do this on his own. "My name

is Barney Rubekowski. I wanted to talk to her about the children's party last night."

The woman bit her lip, and Rube realized she was holding back tears.

"Then you'll have to follow us to the hospital, mister. Mom's been there all night with little Stevie."

"Little Stevie?" Rube echoed.

"Yes—my youngest brother. He was one of the kids poisoned at that party. He and Robert got it the worst, and the doctors told us Robert went into a coma this morning. We're all going out to be with Mom and Stevie, so if you want to talk to her, that's where we'll be all day." She started to move around him and then stopped dead as a thought hit her. "Say, aren't you the one who found out the captain killed that girl?"

Rube winced in spite of her delicate phrasing.

"Yes, I am."

"Are you here to tell Mom who poisoned the kids? Have they caught the bastard yet? Who is it? I'll tell Mom. She might leave the hospital for that—to go strangle him. We'll all help her with that one."

Looking at her red-rimmed eyes, Rube felt very small, and realized he wouldn't need to visit the hospital to talk to Mrs. Telyn. "I don't know yet," he said. "I wanted to talk to her,

to nail down the—uh—suspects. But I won't bother her now. Tell her that Sheriff Boggert or I will contact her when we find out. I hope your brother is all right."

Rube headed for the Jeep so fast he barely heard her good-bye before the station wagon door slammed shut behind her. Seated next to Buddy, he watched the car drive out through the front gate. Starting the Jeep's engine, Rube followed much more slowly. One down, two to go. But before he ventured onto the next place, he thought he might stop at the Creekside Cafe and have a better breakfast than a cup of coffee.

After he gave his order, making sure Buddy was completely under the table and not about to trip any patrons passing by, Rube considered using the wall phone to call the hospital to check on Boggert and the children. But it wasn't necessary—the Halloween party and its results were all anyone was talking about in the restaurant.

"I heard the one boy, Robert, got worse during the night and slipped into a coma. The others aren't near so bad."

The waitress placed a dish of bacon in front of the speaker. "Comes from being such a pig—he ate more of the poison, so

he got sicker. I've seen him in here and how he eats breakfast. I've seen better manners from a pig."

The owner of the restaurant shushed her. "Now, Mae, that's no way to talk about Robert. He's just a child. It's not his fault his parents don't teach him manners. I know Eva has tried but hasn't gotten far. Maybe he'll learn from this. He'll get better and come home and be fine. No more mean talk."

It didn't stop the talk, just changed the subject.

"Heard Sheriff Boggert is raising hell with the doctors, trying to get himself discharged. Only thing keeping him there are bed restraints and knowing his granddaughter's down the hall. This heart attack's been a long time coming. Doc Clyde's been telling him for years to lose sixty pounds."

"Can you blame the man for wanting to get out? Hospitals are horrible places. Sides, he wants to get out and find the nutcase who poisoned the kids. It's a bad time for Dillon to be on vacation. I wonder if they'll call him back here."

Rube felt the obvious side glances his way; the raised voices made sure the conversation was loud enough for him to hear. He was saved from hav-

ing to answer when the waitress arrived with his breakfast. His eggs over easy and toast were set down, and then she placed a stack of pancakes on the table.

Rube looked up, startled.

"I didn't order any pancakes."

She smiled at him. "I know—they're not for you, they're for Buddy. He loves pancakes."

Rube could hear Buddy's tail start thumping under the table. "He does?"

"Sure. Jesse used to bring Buddy in with him all the time. We've missed him." Mae knelt down and patted Buddy's head, at the same time slipping him the plate of pancakes. Rube grabbed the table as it rocked when Buddy leaped up to get at them, his back hitting the underside of the table and almost overturning it.

"He sure behaves better for you, though," Mae said, giving Buddy a final pat and removing the plate, now miraculously empty and gleaming with saliva and little syrup.

"He does?" Rube asked, but Mae was gone. Looking at the massive jaws and the tongue that licked the last of the syrup away from his chops, Rube contemplated Buddy's being any less well-behaved. Shaking his head in disbelief, he turned to his own breakfast, steadfastly

ignoring the pleading looks the Labrador was sending his way over the eggs and all the conversational gambits being tossed about the restaurant.

Taking his time finishing his food, Rube knew he was stalling, putting off the time he'd face his next assignment. But there was only so much time one could spend over two eggs and toast. Pushing his plate away, he left money on the bill and a generous tip for the pancakes and snapped his fingers for Buddy to follow him.

On the way to the door, the huge dog gathered four hiya, Buddy's, and three bye, Buddy's, while only two people offered a "Hi, Rube." Once outside, Buddy lumbered off to the other side of the parking lot, disappearing into the bushes to take care of his business. Rube held the passenger door of the Jeep open until Buddy took his place.

Greg Anders' ranch was south of town; Rube had to get on the freeway briefly before spotting the dirt road leading to the Anders place. It was a road of angles, and he heard the children's voices well before navigating the last turn and seeing the ranch house. For a split second he flashed back to the Ponderosa before realizing there were too many children, most of them too young, and too

many females for this to be the Cartwright family.

As soon as they saw the Jeep, the crowd of children cheered although Rube knew they couldn't see yet who was driving, or even whose car it could be. They were just cheering anyone's arrival, and Buddy stuck his head out the window and grinned in return.

By the time he turned off the engine and opened the car door, a dozen children were crowding around, ready to help him out.

"It's Buddy and Rube!" one tow-headed boy of twelve crowed aloud, and Buddy grinned again, his tail going full time, his nose thrusting into open hands as he said hello.

"Now stand back and give the man some breathing room, kids."

The man who approached was in his forties, his rugged face weatherbeaten by the sun, but not by struggle. Prosperous and in a good mood, he extended his hand to Rube, who shook it.

"Glad to meet you. I've seen you about town, heard you took Buddy in. Nice of you to visit. I'm Greg Anders." He led Rube away from the children, who still tagged along, towards the house. Several adults were sitting on the porch, which ran the full length of the house. An-

ders shooed the children away, and Buddy gladly ran off with them.

Rube looked at the retreating youngsters, the similarity of features obvious, and then at the sheer number of children. Some he recognized from the party, and he realized that the Anderses must have accounted for a full half of the bodies at the Halloween party. There were three generations present that he could see here, and who knew how many more people were inside the house.

"Have a seat, Mr. Rubekow . . . uh, Rube." A compact brunette woman in her early thirties pulled a cane-backed rocking chair forward.

He took the chair, trying not to smile too much, remembering he was there on official business. "Rubekowski is a mouthful. Everyone calls me Rube."

"What is your first name?" a grayhaired woman asked. Rube guessed she was Greg Anders' mother.

"It's Barney, but no one called me that but my wife. Even my mother called me Rube. Or something worse."

"Your wife?" Still the older woman speaking. "I didn't know you were married. She didn't move out here with you?"

Rube tried not to hesitate before he spoke. "No, she died

some years back." Then knowing they'd ask, he added, "Cancer."

"Hell of a thing, cancer," Greg Anders said, propping himself against the porch railing. "It's what killed my second wife. Theresa here—" nodding at the brunette woman "—is my third. Third time's lucky, they say. We've had three kids together; Vicky had three; and Brenda only had one. So all those heathens out there aren't mine. My brother and his wife live with us and they have five of their own, and a cousin of ours lives in town and his four are over for the weekend. So what brings you out our way?"

Rube found himself at a loss for words. He couldn't very well say he'd come out to see if there was a poisoner amongst them. He tried to think of something feasible, fast.

"I don't know the town well yet, but I couldn't help but notice the resemblance of the children, and how many of them were at the party. Five children were taken to the hospital last night, and I just wanted to reassure myself that yours were doing all right. None of them took sick, did they?"

Anders was saying no as a redhaired beauty came out the front door.

"All depends on what you call taking sick. My Michael was

sick all night, but that's because after the party broke up he took the entire candy supply meant for all the children, and ate most of it. But none of them was poisoned, thank God."

Everyone on the porch echoed that. Greg's wife lifted an eyebrow. "I'm not sure God had anything to do with it. Our kids are all so competitive they were all playing the booth games trying to win the most prizes. None of them had gotten around to the bobbing for apples. Growing up here, they eat so many apples that bobbing for them doesn't seem that special. I doubt we'll get them to eat any apples in their sack lunches all year, come to think of it."

Greg smiled at his wife, who looked back at Rube. "Don't worry about being new to town, Rube. A place this small, you'll get to know all the secrets soon enough. A village is just one big gossip session brewing, ready to pop up any time. I'm sure you've already heard some since you've been here. Could hardly help it, what with the captain, Jesse, and his girl. Sad thing that. There wasn't a body in this town that didn't—"

"This town!" A voice boomed from the doorway, and Rube jumped a few inches in his chair. "This town can go to hell and stay there." A huge-should-

dered, caved-in framework of a man stepped through the doorway leaning on a cane, his fierce, cloudy eyes fixed on Rube. He couldn't have been a day under eighty. "You should get out of this town while the getting's good. Oh, it used to be a decent place. Used to be a person would know all the people you'd pass on the street. Now it's all damned tourists and snotty children. That dog of yours have fleas?"

Startled by the old man's ferocity, Rube said, "Why no. Buddy doesn't have fleas."

"Then you'd better get him away from Geoffrey's brats, cause he'll catch 'em from those kids. Filthiest children I've ever seen. You'd think they'd bathe more often. I'd start with their mouths—wash 'em out with lye. One of them sassed me just this morning."

Sassed or not, all the adults on the porch tried to shush Grandpa up to no avail. He planted himself in a chair across from Rube and pointed his cane at him. "You're here about the poisoning, ain't you? I heard from Jacob about how the sheriff swore you in as a deputy. You're wanting to know if the apples that were bad came from us, aren't ya? Well, mister, let me tell you. I'm not averse to laying out poison to get rid of pests, and all

kids are pests, but I'd start closer to home first, and then spread out to the town."

"Grandpa! Stop it, or Mr. Rube will believe you!" Two teenagers came forward from somewhere and Greg Anders signaled to them. They each took one of Grandpa's arms and pulled him up. But the old man wasn't through yet. "Don't let them fool you, Mr. Deputy Sheriff person! They'd soon as cut one another's throats to ensure that much more of an inheritance for themselves. They ain't all sweetness and light, like they look. Ha, how could they be, they've all got my blood in them!" He was still cackling madly as the two boys led him inside.

Theresa cleared her throat. "I apologize, Rube, for that. Don't mind Gramps, he's just gotten cranky in his old age."

As a group of teenagers ran yelling from around the side of the house out of sight towards the road, Rube couldn't help but ask weakly, "Just how many of you are there?"

He couldn't remember just when in the roll call of names the first photo album appeared. Or when they moved inside to the living room to be more comfortable. Or who handed him the first glass of lemonade. Or which person first asked him to stay for lunch. Or who sug-

gested the grand tour of the house. All Rube knew was that getting away from the Anderses was harder than keeping Buddy out of the road during their walks. Finally they were both back in the Jeep, the three hundred farewells over.

"Well, Buddy, did you have a fun time running around with all the children?" Buddy just yawned and scratched with his hind leg. Rube thought about fleas. Reaching the ignition, he froze, his eyes on the dashboard clock.

In disbelief, he looked at his wristwatch. It was after two. He'd spent three and a half hours at the Anders ranch. That was longer than he used to visit his in-laws. It was more time than he'd spent at the lab companies' Christmas parties. Elshia and his boss would make him attend. Worse yet, he'd enjoyed his time with the Anders family once he gave up trying to ask them leading questions.

Lord, he was a terrible investigator. The way things were going, he'd get out to the third address on Eva's list and fall in love with—he checked the name on the paper—Rose Marie Mitchem.

When Boggert heard how his "investigation" was going, he'd probably have another heart

attack. Grandpa Anders might hate children and bitch about how the town was going to the dogs, but did that mean he'd poisoned the apples? And if he had, would there be any evidence left after his close-knit family got home from the party and disposed of incriminating utensils, poison, whatever, and had the entire night to come up with alibis?

Did he really think the Anderses capable of such bestial violence? No, he didn't, but he could easily see them closing ranks against the outside world to protect any one of the family who strayed into madness or attempted murder.

Rube sighed and braked for a stop sign; he was near the edge of town. If he'd been a mind reader instead of a chemist, he might know. As it was, he wished all he had to do was recite the periodic table to John Boggert and not what "facts" he'd unearthed so far.

Santa Rosa Creek Road snaked away from the town proper, and Rube followed the gently winding road, feeling his tenseness from not having driven much easing away. His mind traveled back to what he'd seen and heard since Robert's first scream in the hall. Was it really less than twenty-four hours ago? He had no more idea of who had done it, or why,

than when the ambulances had pulled out of the parking lot—

The deer came from nowhere and ran gallantly across the road. Rube smashed his brakes and swerved the wheel. The Jeep turned in the road like some great fish fighting the tide, then slowly swerved to a stop.

In his mirror, Rube could see the deer as it bounded into the trees. Sweat shivered down his spine like a track of guilty tears.

“Jesus Jehoshaphat.”

Buddy whined and looked at him with big eyes glazed and white around the edges.

Rube clung to the wheel like it was life itself, then slowly started breathing again. There were things to do, were there not? Important things? Boggert was counting on him. And he had his garden to finish, just as soon as he could get back home. He'd get this interview over and done with and go home. Holding to what little comfort these thoughts gave him, he restarted the Jeep and turned down the road, searching for the house number Eva had given him.

He found it half a mile farther on, a narrow winding ribbon of dust that led through apple orchards rich with the smell of their fruit. Robert with the half-eaten apple in his

hand, and Sara Jane on the floor screaming.

But there were apple orchards all over this part of the county. It meant nothing.

Rube slowed as he came to the remnants of a wooden gate. The road split here, half going around in a big circle back to the highway, and the other half going deeper into the woods. The number Eva had given him was painted on the old wood. And there was something else. A poster just like the one Rube had put up all over town. Have you seen me? The missing girl from Morro Bay. The poster looked old and weatherbeaten already, the lower half torn and flapping in the breeze.

Rube drove through.

The dirt road was no more than a track bordered by overgrown weeds. They brushed the underside of the Jeep noisily, getting crushed and releasing a smell of rot. October had been dry, as had the months before, and the foliage was brown and crisp. Perfect fire weather, Rube thought.

The road curved west between oak and pine and apple trees, not growing wild in this section, their fruit unpicked and rotten upon the leaf-laden ground. The wind was picking up, tossing the leaves into piles against the tree trunks. A bank of clouds, low and dark, scud-

ded between the ground and the sun, and suddenly Rube felt a chill, like a last wind through his bones.

He came around the curve and upon the house suddenly. It was ramshackle yet whole, the entire front yard carpeted in cans and bins and planters full of flowers and cacti and blooming things Rube had no name for. There was a hand-painted sign that read: HERBS AND SPICES BY THE OZ OR LB.

Rube parked the Jeep next to the last tree in sight. It was still a good two hundred feet from the house, but he wanted to walk up, to take in the scene and think about what he'd say.

He left the window down so Buddy could breathe.

The odors were overwhelming. Spice-smells so strong he was afraid to breathe deeply. Memories were triggered. Old memories of boyhood, walking through his mother's kitchen in late October, the pumpkin pie baking in the oven.

Rube worked his way down a narrow aisle lined with boxes and planters. Ahead he could hear a voice, singing. The song was low and almost indistinguishable from the breeze that flirted with his face.

The words came to him on the air, with the spice:

"They are the children
who are born between
seasons,

For the gentlest of
reasons.

They are the children who
are born in splendor,
Yet they're always the
lender.

When they answer the
call,
October Hearts break
easiest of all."

But Rube couldn't find the singer. He stepped out from the rows of boxes and was stopped by a more grating voice, a voice that dealt in anger.

"Can I help you?" It wasn't a question.

She looked irritated at his appearance, twitchy, as if he'd broken in on some important activity, some private thing she didn't wish to share.

"You have a lot of . . . spices and herbs," he said. Stalling until he could find the right words.

"Prices are all listed on the boxes," she said. She was cleaning the prongs of a garden rake, wiping the tines with a rag. She wasn't very tall. But there was a roughness about her that extended farther than the work-hardened hands, as though she'd once worn her feelings out into a storm and had been forever drenched and wind-bat-

tered. Her eyes, at the corners, were webbed with deep-set lines, almost grooves, and her hair was cropped very short. Gray streaked from her temples and widened out along the sides over small, flat ears. Her nose was like a pixie's, tiny and flattened, as though she'd butted her face against a post in the dark.

"Do you sell apples?" Rube asked.

Her frown deepened, the grooves in her face standing out like ruts in a rainswept road.

"'Course I do. Everyone around here does. But you're kinda late in the season for the best of the lot."

Rube heard the voice again, the strange lilting lyrics, and tried to peer past her. She bobbed and weaved in front of him, like a boxer blocking blows.

"Who's that singing?" he asked.

Anger like an amber spark in her eyes. A strike against flint. Emotion on bone.

"That's no one," she said.

"That's certainly someone," Rube said.

"She's just . . ." The woman made circular motions with a finger near her head. "Funny, she is. In the head."

"Your daughter?"

The anger in her eyes turned from amber to dark hate. Such

expressive eyes. So young in such an old face, he thought.

"Yes. She's mine."

"Can I talk to her?"

"What for? Thought you were looking for apples?"

It's what he got for being ill prepared, he realized. As an acting deputy, he flopped. . . .

Rube remembered the gate at the turnoff, and the torn poster.

"I'm helping the sheriff with a missing person case. A young girl from the area. He asked me to talk to the children, see if they'd seen her, heard from her. You know how kids talk to each other . . ."

"I don't want to hear it," she said, cutting him off. "We don't bother those in the village, and they don't bother us." But the anger in her eyes—had it changed there for a moment . . . looked almost like . . . fear?

"There was also some trouble in the village," Rube pushed, "children at a party. May I speak with your daughter?"

She slammed the rake down, the tines digging into the ground. Rube jumped. Somewhere behind the woman a cat yowled and leaped from his perch on a box of flowers, then hit the ground running.

"She don't talk. She's dumb."

Rube tried to edge his way around her, but she blocked his

path neatly. "If you didn't come to buy, you can get off my property."

Rube's shoulders slumped. Boggert would probably have some words of wisdom about his investigative technique.

He shrugged. "Thanks anyway," he said.

He turned and walked back to the Jeep, feeling her eyes on him as he left the yard.

But when he got to the Jeep, Buddy was gone.

"Jesus Jehoshaphat."

He could hear the big dog rambling through the bushes off to the side of the Jeep. The cat, he realized. Buddy had jumped through the open window and chased the damned cat.

Rube moved down the path quickly, hoping the big Lab hadn't eaten anything he wasn't supposed to, or wrecked her garden.

But twenty feet in, the path became a tangle of overgrown viny weeds. They ripped at Rube's pants legs and tore at his bare hands. "Buddy, damn you. Don't you eat that cat!" It was one of the dog's weaknesses, he knew.

The trail cleared suddenly, and Rube walked out on a flat space. In the middle of it sat a trash dumpster on wheels, one of the large commercial-size dumpsters as big as a truckbed.

Buddy was digging furiously with his front paws beneath one end of the thing. Thank God he wasn't eating the—

But this was worse.

Rube felt his knees go slack as he looked past the dog. Buddy had quit digging and now was sitting on his big haunches. His eyes were white with fear of what he'd discovered and a whimper came from his mouth.

"Oh my God," Rube said, stumbling to his knees beside the dog. Why did he always find these things, and why was Buddy always digging them up?

The wild animals had been here first. Possums or raccoons had torn the corner of the old green tarp. Human hair stained with blood flowed from the tarp. One side of the face had been severely chewed. But the other side was recognizable enough. Rube should recognize it. He'd pinned her posters all over town just a few days ago. Tammy Martin, age fifteen, missing from Morro Bay.

"Jesus Jehoshaphat."

Rube couldn't stand to look any longer. As Buddy whined, Rube looked away, past the end of the dumpster. At the beginning of a field of pumpkins, a scarecrow waved in the wind. The head was a rotten pumpkin with carved-out eyes and

jagged teeth, but what it wore made Rube's blood run cold. A Halloween costume of rags, Cinderella before the ball, before the change, before the good fairy godmother had come to visit. The tattered jacket and dress hung from the stuffed and crucified dummy that was nailed to a post driven deep in the ground. No shoes, though. Cinderella had no shoes.

"Where are her shoes?" Rube realized he was whimpering along with the big yellow Lab, both of them moving in frantic little circles around the shallow grave, Rube still on his knees. "She must have shoes," Rube said. "Buddy, do you have her shoes? Have you eaten her shoes?" He could hear the ring of madness in his own voice, but he couldn't seem to stop it.

Like a tsunami, it crashed against his sanity.

"You had to mess in things, didn't you." The voice was scratchy and close by. Rube looked up and saw the twin bores of an old shotgun. So close he could see the insides of the double barrels.

"Where are her shoes?" he muttered.

"On her feet," the woman said. "I buried her in them."

And then Rube remembered the poster again. She'd been wearing cutoffs and a tank top. He wanted to spin around on

his knees and dig her up and check her clothing.

But he didn't. He faced the double barrels, sitting there on his knees. The dark clouds overhead did nothing to cool him. Nothing to ease the feverish sweat that had popped out on his flesh. His skin crawled, but not with the fear of dying. Though die he was sure he would. His flesh crawled with the realization that he had come upon one of those great sicknesses in the world that one reads about in the daily papers. One of those monstrous ills wrought by twisted people. Everyday people. Like this one, who was about to blow a very large hole in him.

He started to shiver.

He wished she would hurry. Waiting was hard. His stomach was threatening to lose its contents. His bowels felt loose.

Go ahead and shoot, his mind screamed.

Instead, she started to speak:

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" she said. "But I *know* things about that town. I know what they're like. I do, I do. Sam used to go to town all the time, and he'd come home and tell me all about those hypocrites. Ah, my Sam, he could talk the ear off a sow, you know?"

She looked wistful for just a second as the sun peeked between the heavy, dark clouds. Her hair, short and gray, was suddenly haloed like the pictures of the old saints.

"It's Eva Surbol's fault."

Rube sat dumbfounded and shivering. Buddy edged closer to him, growling slightly now.

"That's where Sam went. I know it was."

Rube put a hand out to the dog. The muscles in Buddy's neck were tense, as though he were ready to strike.

"Left me with his child. They look alike, you know. They even think alike. Never could keep that man on the place, and Cindy's just the same."

She paused, and the sun beat down, and time was like the last great taffy pull, all stretched out and taut.

"You know how I know?"

Rube shook his head.

"'Cause that old witch sent for my Cindy. Wanted to take her, too. That's how I know. Tries every year to get my Cindy away from me to go to their stupid school—what do they teach in those places nowadays? Nothing. And she sent that one—" she pointed at the grave "—to take her away. She came down my road pretty as you please, spouting some nonsense about running away from

home. Just an act. Tell me I'm wrong."

"The child—Tammy Martin—was a runaway," Rube said. "Eva knew about Cindy, and she didn't..." Repercussions spun through his head. "She didn't send Cindy an invitation, did she? She knew Cindy wasn't enrolled in school, and she used the school registration rolls as the invitation list. But the apples—"

"Ha!" she cackled, thumbing the hammer back on the big gun. "They're all full of lies. No invitation, but who does she ask to donate apples for their party? They all laugh at me, you think I don't know? Do you think I care what they do? They can't get to me, or my Cindy. Nobody's taking my Cindy away..."

"Mama."

The voice was soft and wistful and almost a begging thing behind them.

"You go back to the house, now. You understand?"

"Mama, that's my party dress. What is it..."

"You never mind!"

The shotgun came up, the big barrels almost teasing Rube's nose.

Past the barrels he could see a faint blur of movement.

"Mama? What is that..."

The gun steadied, and Rube looked up into the woman's

grievous eyes. Something hardened there, came to a resolution.

Rube closed his eyes.

He heard a thunk and an exhalation, almost a gasp.

He waited for the shot.

He opened one eye.

Rose Marie lay face down in the weeds. He could see her back moving with deep breaths. Cindy stood beside her with a shovel in her hand. She wasn't looking at Rube. Or her mother.

"She killed Tammy." She was looking past Rube to the grave. "She was my only friend. Tammy was gonna take me to the party. She helped me with my costume and everything."

She looked down at her mother. "Mama?"

Rube stood shakily. "It's okay, honey. You did the right thing." He saw when he looked closer at her face and eyes that she wasn't mentally challenged at all. She looked drugged, a mistiness in her eyes like a fog. But even as he watched, it was clearing.

He picked up the old shotgun and fumbled around until he broke the breech and the shells jumped out, red and deadly in the gray sunlight.

Rube took the little girl's hand. "Show me your phone, sweetheart."

*

It was late afternoon by the time Rube walked into Boggert's hospital room. He was late because he'd brought Cindy Mitchem in earlier for evaluation. And because the drive along the highway in the Jeep had been slow going.

"Evening, John," he said, moving up to the bed.

Boggert was eating what looked like Jell-O. Specks of green floated in the red mass.

"God, I hate this food."

Rube grinned. He'd showered and changed after calling the county sheriff's department. They'd let him go after what seemed like hours of "conversation."

Boggert put his spoon down and picked up a pad full of notes. He pointed at the chair beside his bed and stared at the scrawls in disgust.

"Well, what a fine mess you walked into this time," Boggert said.

Rube shrugged. But inside where it didn't show, he still shook. Too many bodies and too much craziness for one old man and a dog, he thought.

"Old Rose Marie, after they revived and booked her, talked her head off, Rube." Boggert paused to gather his breath. "She doesn't speak highly of you." The big man smothered a smile before continuing. "Years ago, or so the people I've talked

with say, Rose's old man—Sam—played at the saloons around the area. He was extremely talented, but he drank too much. Always wound up on a bender after a two day gig. Forgot to come home a lot."

"And he stayed with Eva Surbol?"

Boggert lifted an eyebrow. "So they say, yes."

"So Rose wasn't completely crazy?"

"Well, that's for the court to decide. She admitted to drug-ging her own daughter for years, just to keep her close. For the daughter's own good, she said. And she really thought the runaway, Tammy, was there to steal her daughter away. Somehow had gotten it in her head that Eva and the girl were in cahoots. Tammy was just hiding out, working for Rose, she thought. No one goes out there much, and she thought she'd be safe. But she learned of the party before she got to Rose Marie's and told Cindy about it. They waited for the invitation, and when one didn't show up, Tammy must have told Cindy they'd go anyway. Of course Rose Marie stopped that. Killed Tammy and then decided to doctor the apples and barrel water."

"Life's too hard sometimes," Rube said. "We get lost."

"Most of us don't kill people," Boggert said, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed.

"You supposed to do that?" Rube asked.

"Long as I take this IV with me," Boggert said, pulling the bottle from the stand. "Come on." He climbed into a wheelchair beside the bed. "Push me."

Rube pushed. "It's positive that she poisoned the apples?"

Boggert nodded. "The county sheriff filled me in. They found the syringes in her garden workroom. With a bowl full of crushed morning glories. And the stuff she was giving to Cindy. They checked with the pharmacist just to be sure, but Rose Marie hadn't stepped foot in there for years. She grows everything she needs on the place. With a nice fifty gallon drum of pesticides. From the specimens you gathered, and the apples the county boys found at the Vets Hall, it seems she doctored up about half the apples she delivered. Dropped a bag of crushed morning glories right into the barrel that was standing there—"

"But Jacob said he washed the barrel out after he got there," Rube interrupted. Boggert just looked at him.

"Jacob's old. He probably just checked to see if there was trash inside, and then filled it

with water. I'm surprised Robert was able to knock the thing over, but he is hefty for his age. Anyhow, Rose Marie said the apples were to show Eva Surbol what it felt like to have someone try to steal your child. To stop her from trying to take Cindy." Boggert paused and turned to look at Rube. "You understand any of that?"

"Yeah," Rube said. "I guess I do."

They progressed down the hall, Boggert holding his IV bottle high.

"Turn left here."

"Where we going?" Rube asked.

"To see Sara Jane."

They stopped at the next door.

Rube heard the now familiar voice, singing:

"Born between seasons,
For the gentlest of
reasons.

Born in splendor,
Always the lender.

When they answer the
call,

October Hearts break eas-
iest of all."

"That's neat," Sara Jane said.

"I'm gonna be a songwriter when I grow up," Cindy said. They were sitting side by side on the bed.

Boggert shook his head.

Rube smiled. "They let her come up to visit. She'll be here a while until they see how much the drugs have affected her. I told her about Sara Jane and she wanted to meet her."

"I'm glad," Boggert said. "Glad something good came of all this."

The last red of a good sunset caressed the big old tree that rubbed his house. Rube was down on his knees, moving the carnations away from the heartsease. The soil was rich now with what he'd brought to it. But farther back, Buddy was digging a new hole.

"No," Rube said. "Don't dig anything else up. Please."

It made him realize that there was room for a tree back there. Not apples, though. He'd had enough of apples for one season.

Maybe a nice dogwood tree.

Well, he'd think about it.

And meanwhile maybe his heartsease would grow.

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UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the Mid-December issue.

On a Monday morning, Detective Tetzloff returned from a well-deserved vacation. He entered headquarters, wondering what his next assignment would be. He did not have long to wait.

"Akim," said Captain Kaplan, frowning, "we have a serious problem here in Floradale. Young punks and their girlfriends are pulling one armed nighttime robbery after another. We've got to stop them before somebody gets killed."

"All-night convenience stores?" queried the detective.

"No, private homes in well-to-do neighborhoods. They operate as a couple, and from the sketchy descriptions I judge that several couples are involved. The occupants are roused from their sleep by an armed masked man standing at their bedside holding a pistol aimed at them. His female accomplice then gets whatever they are after at that address."

"I suppose they then proceed to strip the place?"

"No, they go for one object only—the most valuable piece."

"Do they follow any particular pattern?" inquired Tetzloff.

"Not timewise. They strike at different times of the night."

"Any suggestions?"

Captain Kaplan lighted his briar pipe and blew out the match as he pondered his answer. "You might pay particular attention to Primrose Circle. Some residents there have reported strangers wandering around the neighborhood." He waved his hand in dismissal, adding, "Do the best you can, Akim. We're counting on you."

The six robbing couples were indeed busy that week, hitting homes at numbers 202 through 207 on Primrose Circle. On each occasion, the homeowners were awakened by a masked man standing beside their bed and holding a pistol pointed in their direction.

"No noise or you get it," he warned in a raspy voice, which was undoubtedly disguised.

As he kept the frightened owners covered, his girlfriend quickly seized the object they desired. They vanished quietly with a hissed warning not to move for ten minutes. In five of the robberies, the

occupants waited; long before that interval had passed, they heard a car start up somewhere outside. Trembling, they reached for the telephone and called the police.

In one case, however, the man of the house reached for the bedside phone as soon as the pair was out of the room. That proved to be the undoing of the gang.

One robbery took place each night, Monday through Saturday, at different hours—at 1:00, 1:30, 2:00, 2:30, 3:00, and 3:30—and each was carried out by a different duo in the gang. Only a single item was taken in each case; during the week the robbers took (in one order or another) a late model word processor, a three-carat diamond ring, a brand new computer, an antique oil painting, a color television set, and a state-of-the-art 35mm. zoom camera. All six couples participated; one man was named McCoy.

- (1) Mr. O'Dell pulled his robbery the next night after Ian struck and the night just before another of the gang stole the color television set. Their accompanying girlfriends included Alice, Becky, and Cindy. None of them struck the home numbered 202 nor the one robbed at 1:30.
- (2) Delia participated in the robbery that took place half an hour earlier in the nighttime than the one at 205 Primrose Circle but at a later time of night than the one in which the word processor was taken. The three robbers included Jack, Karl, and Luke. None of the three operated on Monday or Saturday nights.
- (3) The robbery that took place at 3:30 occurred on the night just before the one at 202 Primrose Circle but later in the week than the one during which the oil painting was taken. These jobs were pulled by Mr. Queen, Mr. Rogers, and Mr. Purdy (whose first name isn't Jack). Cindy was not involved in any of the three.
- (4) Elsie was the girlfriend along on the night just before Greg pulled his robbery and the night just after the robbery that took place at 3:00 (which was not the work of Karl). In these three cases, a camera, a computer, and a diamond ring were stolen.
- (5) On Monday, Friday, and Saturday nights the following robberies were committed (in one order or another): one at 1:30, one in which Flora participated, and one at 206 Primrose Circle (which was not done by Mr. Queen). The diamond ring was taken on a different night.

- (6) Robberies at 205, 206 (which was not by Mr. Purdy), and 207 (which did not occur at 2:30) were the work of Jack, Alice's boyfriend, and the pair who took the camera. They didn't involve Mr. North or the robber who struck at 2:00
- (7) Hank did not pull his job at 202 or 207 Primrose Circle; he also did not strike at 1:00 or 3:30 at night.
- (8) An oil painting (which was not taken by Delia and her boyfriend) was not the object stolen at 1:30 at night (which was not at 203 Primrose Circle).

On Sunday morning a weary Detective Tetzloff reported back to his superior. Captain Kaplan was already seated at his desk. The blue haze of pipe smoke indicated he had been there for some time.

"Well, Akim, what luck did you have?" the captain asked anxiously.

"Only captured one pair of 'em," answered Tetzloff, "but I nabbed 'em red-handed. One resident phoned as soon as the dirty buggers were leavin' his bedroom. They hadn't had time to load the loot into their Chrysler before I had the cuffs on both of 'em. After a bit of grillin', they're cooperatin' nicely."

"You mean they are implicating others of the gang?"

"Squealin' their little hearts out, sir, after their lawyer struck a plea bargain with the D.A. Just a matter of time before we round up the rest of the gang."

"Just whom did you arrest?" asked the captain.

"The pair who pulled a robbery at 1:30 one night durin' the week."

"Come on, Akim," said Kaplan, smiling. "Don't play games with me this early in the morning. Their names?"

"Oh," replied Detective Akim Tetzloff, grinning back, "the armed robber was _____. He and his girlfriend _____ hit the home at _____ Primrose Circle at 1:30 on _____ night. I grabbed the pair just as they were makin' off with an expensive _____."

Who were the dastardly duo? Where and when did they attempt their despicable robbery? What did they take?

FICTION

MINER OPERATION

Bill Crenshaw



Illustration by Richard Loehle

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Cedric Mullinax stood uneasily near the entrance to the Racquet Club stands, going over his lines as if rehearsing a play. Three words. "Hank," he would say, "I'm through." If he didn't quit Hank's "operation" now, he never would.

Hank called it Operation Clementine, Operation Booby Hatch, Operation Miner Operation. At one time Cedric had thought Hank funny.

Maybe he won't show, Cedric thought, hoping to just slip away. But then Cedric saw him, Hank Rabon, tanned, confident, easy of smile, ready of laugh, escorting the seductive Miss What's-Her-Name from Residential. Cedric felt panic grip his soft middle. He couldn't do it, he just couldn't.

You have to, he told himself.

The lovely couple drifted closer. Cedric raised a timid forefinger, as if summoning a New York waiter. Hank ignored him.

They drew even with him. Cedric cleared his throat discreetly. Miss What's-Her-Name barely glanced his way. Hank floated past.

In desperation, Cedric thrust out a hand and clutched Hank's sleeve. "Mr. Rabon," he said, ducking as if expecting to be cuffed. "A word?"

Hank turned to Miss What's-Her-Name. "Pardon me, my dear." She smiled. He smiled. He released her into the stream of people flowing into the stands. He showed Cedric his teeth, but Cedric wouldn't have called it a smile. "What is 'it'?" said Hank.

Cedric opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

Hank's eyes narrowed. "Have you done the jump rope?"

Cedric shook his head.

Hank looked at his watch. "Cedric," he started, his voice unbearably cold for such a pleasant June day.

"What I mean is," said Cedric, sweat beading across his high forehead, "what I mean to say is—Hank, I'm through." He stood straight to show he really meant it.

Hank's face darkened, a storm cloud, lightning to follow. He clamped Cedric's elbow. "Sit with me."

"No, no," said Cedric. "Really, I . . ."

Hank showed all his teeth. "I insist." He dragged Cedric to the stands.

They sat a few rows down from the Old Man, the founder of Hammond Properties, Inc., ensconced in his accustomed place, ready for the annual charity match between his company and Cartwright Real Es-

tate, top salesperson vs. top salesperson, gender be hanged. The proceeds might go to charity, but to the Old Man better come the cup. He had won that same cup during the first match in 1954, and he hated letting Cartwright get it.

On the Old Man's right hunched Mr. Fenster, office manager, looking bewildered in the sun, his heavy black glasses already sliding down his nose. On the Old Man's left sat Miss What's-Her-Name, looking at Cedric and Hank, with Cedric sitting where she wanted to sit, by Hank, the marvelous Hank, Hank the Hunk, the rising star of Commercial. Cedric could barely meet her eyes, expecting a knife glare of you'll-get-yours, but instead she smiled at him and nodded and then whispered something to the Old Man.

"What?" said the Old Man. "Where? Oh yes." He gave them the famous nod. "Good morning, Rabon. Morning . . ."

"Mullinax," prompted Miss What's-Her-Name.

"Mullinax," finished the Old Man.

"Good morning, sir," Hank called cheerily. "Perfect for victory."

"That's the spirit," he called back. "We'll show Cartwright, eh, Rabon?"

"You bet, sir," Hank said. "In fact, I did bet."

The Old Man laughed. Hank and Miss What's-Her-Name laughed. Cedric made a laughterlike noise. He sounded like a sea otter.

"Try, at least try, Cedric," said Hank softly without moving his lips.

"What?" said Cedric leaning in.

Hank rolled his eyes back toward the Old Man, and Cedric understood, as he should have right away, that Hank had never intended to sit with Miss What's-Her-Name. She was where she was supposed to be, by the Old Man, and Cedric knew that during the match she'd be leaning on the Old Man's shoulder at exciting moments, brushing into his elbow with her, well, her ample . . .

Cedric felt beads of sweat erupt across his forehead.

Well, she would also drop tiny pearls of Hank's praise into the Old Man's ear. The Rise of Hank Rabon. Nothing left to chance.

Especially not JayeBeth Miner, just entering the court to a hearty ovation from thirty or forty employees of the Old Man, polite applause from somewhat fewer Cartwright Real Estate employees on the other side of the court. The remaining two or three hundred

seats were filled with Chamber of Commerce types who would applaud all shots equally, congratulate the winner, and commiserate with the loser to keep all business contacts in order.

"So," said Hank between teeth, "you want to keep working for her?"

Cedric shuddered. JayeBeth Miner, head of Industrial Properties Acquisition and Development. The company's biggest moneymaker. The Old Man called her "Gold" Miner, which she tolerated with a tight smile.

"Where's Mullinax?" said Hank in her voice. "Send me Mullinax!"

Like fingernails on blackboards. Cedric felt his teeth vibrate. As company computer wizard, he didn't work *for* her exactly, but he was at her hourly beck and imperious call. If Hank's operation succeeded, though, Hank would have her job, and Cedric would work for Hank. Which might be just as bad as working for her. Or worse.

"Just look at her, Cedric," said Hank. "Clementine. Oh, my darlin'. Look."

Cedric looked. JayeBeth Miner stood ready at the baseline, swaying on the balls of her feet, jaw set, lips thinned in that grim concentration they knew so well, all adrenaline and pur-

pose. Her opponent, Cartwright's top salesman, was looking pale beneath his salon tan; his jogging in place and stretching seemed mere show; his practice swings mere bravado. He looked as if he regretted those extra drinks at those power lunches. He knew who he was up against.

Cedric looked back to Ms. Miner. Determined. Driven. A woman of early mornings and late nights, aerobics and self-help tapes, a formidable presence, a daunting salesperson, a dynamo overwhelmingly impressive to business contacts.

But to those who worked under her she was an obsessive, micro-managing detail freak, bonkers for perfection, bonkers being, for Hank, the operative word. She was an unexploded bomb, Hank said, waiting for the right tap of the hammer. Which they were trying to provide. Hank's Miner Operation. They were trying to drive her over the edge, to make her, as Hank called her in addition to Clementine, Ms. Crazy.

"Well?" Hank demanded. "Do you still want out?"

Cedric hesitated.

"Cedric, there is the little matter of . . ."

"No," Cedric said wearily, "I don't want out."

"Of course not," said Hank, laying a comfortable hand on Cedric's shoulder.

Hank was too sure of himself. Cedric felt the need to rebel. "I don't think this will work. A few extra grams won't make any difference." He tried to snort derisively. A pathetic rebellion, as usual.

Hank's hand lifted. "You *did* fix the racquet?"

"Just like you said." He had jammed little balls of lead shot into the string holes of Ms. Crazy's racquet the day before. Not enough, he thought, to weigh down a hummingbird.

"It'll work. Leverage and balance and time, Cedric. The basis of the whole operation. Watch and learn."

Cedric watched, but the extra weight didn't seem to bother her. She smoked her serves past her opponent; she zipped returns just beyond his racquet to kick up chalk at the baseline. Miss What's-Her-Name giggled and cooed behind them. Ms. Crazy won the first set easily.

"Well done," bellowed the Old Man.

Cedric felt an unexpected glow. She might win. The great Hank Rabon might be wrong.

But the glow iced over as he realized that Hank would think he had botched the job. "I did fix the racquet," he said. His voice cracked. "Honest."

"Patience, rabbit," said Hank, unruffled. He began

humming "My Darling Clementine." "Dwelt a miner, forty-niner..."

The players traded the first four games of set two. Ms. Crazy began the fifth game. "Racquet getting heavy?" said Hank quietly. "Arm getting tired? Losing your grip?"

Cedric didn't think so. But then she double-faulted, missed two easy kills, lost her backhand. The Cartwright player broke her service.

A ripple of chatter swept the Cartwright fans. Cedric could see JayeBeth Miner talking furiously to herself.

"Light she was and like a feather," sang Hank softly.

The players traded games until Ms. Miner lost the set.

Hank smiled.

"Can't understand it," snapped the Old Man. "Off her game." The Old Man's voice carried to the court below. Ms. Crazy's jaw locked down so hard that Cedric wanted to leap and run. But he sat rigid and disbelieving as she lost control over shots, got frustrated, fired harder, missed, missed, missed. Game, set, match, and bragging rights for a year lost to Cartwright.

"Now she's lost and gone forever," sang Hank to Cedric. "Dreadful sorry, Clementine."

The stands began clearing. Ms. Crazy stood in center court frozen in disbelief, staring at her shoes.

"Hear she's not going to do a million dollars this quarter," said the Old Man, standing to leave. "First time, too."

"Jump rope," ordered Hank.

Alone in her office to shorten the rope, Cedric half expected Ms. Crazy to pop from behind a desk, finger leveled at his eyes. "Aha," she'd shout, and he'd be dead. But he knew at this hour he was really alone—nobody else could bypass the electronic locks. Which was why Hank had recruited him.

Recruited? Blackmailed. "Just a little joke," Hank had said, so Cedric opened her office for him. When Hank asked him a second time and Cedric tried to refuse, Hank had him cold. "Caught you in her office, didn't I?" he said. "Breaking and entering. Lost job. Jail." Cedric was trapped.

So Cedric did Hank's dirty work. Hank wanted Ms. Crazy's job, her spacious office, her perks, but he couldn't outearn her while he was in Commercial, and he wasn't about to work for her, and she wasn't about to retire. So he had to get rid of her. "She's nuts," Hank had said, pretending to be Cedric's buddy. "You know it, I

know it. But the Old Man doesn't know it. We can help her show him." And as the Old Man's Golden Boy in Commercial, he'd be a cinch to slide right into her office on the Industrial side. He'd be developing properties instead of showing offices.

Operation Miner Operation was to be a multi-pronged attack, mental, emotional, physical. The Disorientation Phase came first. Ms. Crazy kept her desktop precisely laid out. Cedric rearranged it. Keyboard closer to the edge by millimeters, Rolodex farther from the phone. Alter the order of her reference books. Replace sharpened pencils with unsharpened, lined index cards with unlined. Not all at once. Over weeks. A pattern of forgetfulness.

Then the Losing Your Marbles Phase. A note from Andrea, no last name, no return address: "JB—I can't thank you enough. How thoughtful—as always. Of course I'll put in the good word."

Then a subscription or two in her name, some catalogue orders, a call from her doctor reminding her of an appointment she didn't remember making. A sympathy card, signed only with an initial, when no one had died. A phone call from someone saying he was re-

turning her call. Disappearing memos. Missed meetings.

Ms. Crazy never said anything about any of it, but she got progressively more demanding, more snappish, more intolerant of imperfection.

Then the Losing Your Touch Phase, the physical. Increase resistance on her ski machine but leave the setting the same. Change the stride on her pedometer so she power-walked farther than it said. Shorten her jump rope bit by bit so that she missed jumps occasionally, then more often. Substitute real coffee for her decaf. Cedric thought it all was silly. "It'll work," Hank assured him. "She'll go nuts."

She began to look drained at the end of the day.

And now, in her office, for the Final Phase, Cedric thought Hank might be right. Hadn't she turned to stone on the tennis court just hours ago, stunned into immobility? Seeing her standing like that made Cedric's tummy tighten. He didn't hate her. Sometimes in fact, in the old days, when she was on a roll, he had thought her almost magnificent.

But he couldn't say that to Hank. For Hank it was holy war.

Cedric lifted the jump rope. Previously he'd shaved off centimeters. Tonight Hank said

take off a half a foot. She'd figure it out then, of course. Which was the plan. When she realized that she had been, as she had surely suspected but never dared say, sabotaged, she'd blame poor Mr. Fenster.

Office Manager might have been Mr. Fenster's title, but he was really the Old Man's harmless cousin who had been with him for almost fifty years and who now puttered around checking paper clips and travel vouchers, smiling and pushing his black glasses back up his nose, kept around out of kindness and family loyalty. Cedric hated what he was about to do.

Mr. Fenster's heavy black glasses contained hearing aids in their earpieces. Vanity glasses, Hank said, and Mr. Fenster *was* sensitive about his hearing loss. It wasn't something you ever mentioned, not even when the glasses slid off his face and crashed onto your desk sending little plastic doors and hearing aid batteries everywhere. When that happened, you pretended to be distracted by something else until Mr. Fenster could put all the pieces back again.

Cedric dug in his pocket for a tiny battery the diameter of a dime. He laid it carefully behind Ms. Crazy's Rolodex. She'd find it and the cut rope and she'd snap, Hank said.

She'd take Fenster's head off. And the Old Man would have hers. To accuse sweet old Mr. Fenster of anything would prove she was crazy.

Cedric hesitated. He could reach over and retrieve the battery, put it in his pocket, walk out the door, and at least spare Mr. Fenster. If he dared, he could stand up to Hank Rabon.

He stood for a long time. He left the office with empty hands and pockets.

The Final Phase went better than expected. Cedric was miserable.

Ms. Crazy had come to work precisely on time but without that confidence in her stride that parted the waves. She was pale, hesitant. "Nice game," someone said, meaning to comfort, but Cedric saw her eyes go flinty and he hunched his shoulders against the whiplash sure to come. It never came. She seemed diminished. He found himself sad.

At her lunch workout she tripped on her jump rope, fell flat on her face. Mr. Fenster rushed in at the crash only to be thrown out. "I am *fine*," came her voice through the slammed door.

"Her nose is bleeding," Mr. Fenster said, bewildered. Cedric looked at Hank. Hank smiled.

So Cedric sat, tension like a wire twisting between his temples. She would reach for her Rolodex; she would find the battery; she would explode.

At two thirty-three precisely she blasted out of her office and shot directly for Mr. Fenster. When she finished, she had lost her job.

"She must be crazy," said the Old Man, hands on hips, staring at her back as she stumbled to her office with what dignity she could muster. "The idea. Sabotage? Fenster? She's been losing her touch for weeks. The woman is a lunatic."

Cedric had kept his eyes locked on his computer screen. But at the end of the day Hank appeared by his desk, humming. Cedric tried not to look up, but his eyes were drawn to Hank like iron filings to a magnet.

"Let's party," said Hank, making it clear that Cedric's best interest lay in doing whatever Hank suggested or certain information about a desk and racquet and jump rope would find its way to the Old Man's ear.

So they partied, or Hank did, toasting victory with his one-man captive audience. "Here's to the look on her face. Here's to the Old Man. Here's to me, to us, I mean." Cedric dutifully raised his glass and pretended

to drink. Hank Rabon owned him, body and soul.

And in the wee hours, singing "Clementine," Hank steered them back to the company. He wanted to sit in her office, savor the victory. His little friend would let him in, wouldn't he, because he was such a good little friend. Yes, Hank, of course, Hank. Hank's arm was draped across Cedric's shoulders. "Turn on the lights, little friend."

"That might not be such a good idea," said Cedric.

"Right," said Hank, "you're right. Good boy, watching out for buddy Hank." His breath was a distillery. "Now open up."

Cedric bypassed the lock. Hank swept in and took possession, the huge office, the desk, couch, fitness corner, bar. "Mine," said Hank, arms spread out in the dim light from the windows. "All mine."

Cedric didn't think so. It didn't seem like his. It was still hers. It always would be. He could almost see her sitting at her desk in the dark.

Then he realized he *was* seeing her.

"Ms. Miner," he said.

"Clementine," corrected Hank. "Ms. Crazy."

"I believe he was speaking to me," came the voice from the desk.

Hank froze in the middle of the floor.

"So," she said. "Hank Rabon and his little toad."

Cedric made a noise unfortunately similar to a croak.

"You were fired," said Hank, overcoming his surprise. "You're not supposed to be here. Call security, Cedric."

The only phone was somewhere in the dark near Ms. Crazy. "But—" Cedric began.

"Now," said Hank.

Cedric eased to the desk. "Sorry, Ms. Miner," he said, reaching.

Her arm whipped down and something crashed to the desk inches in front of his extended fingers, a *crack* followed by pattering noises.

The tennis racquet, Cedric realized. The lead shot.

"Still some of the little devils left," she said. "So much damage done by such little tiny balls. And the jump rope's been *cut*."

"So?" asked Hank.

"Then there's the battery. Not the right size for Mr. Fenster's glasses. Far too big."

"You idiot," snapped Hank at Cedric.

"If I had realized that right away," she said, "I wouldn't have ruined the fingerprints."

Hank regained his composure. "So what are you saying, Ms. Miner?"

"Don't you mean 'Ms. Crazy'?" she said.

We're dead, thought Cedric.

"Isn't that what you've been doing for weeks, making me crazy?"

"Well, it sounds crazy to me," said Hank. "Sounds paranoid. Sounds dangerous. In fact, we'd better leave now and find security. Come along, Cedric." Hank started for the door.

Cedric stood unmoving.

Hank stopped and turned. "Well, Cedric?"

Ms. Crazy fixed him with a stare. "Well, Cedric?"

Cedric couldn't break away from her stare.

"Let's go, Cedric," said Hank. "Now."

"Your new boss?" said Ms. Crazy. "I'm good at my job, Mullinax, because I know how to read people. My guess is that you're not anxious to work for good ol' Hank there. Maybe that's why you left the wrong battery, hoping to get caught. Maybe that's why you're just standing here. You can't bring yourself to go through that door. Am I right?"

"Now, Cedric," said Hank. His voice was tight.

"Upset, isn't he?" she said quietly. "Anxious. Worried. What does that tell you? That you have power. Ever had power before, Cedric?"

Cedric felt dizzy. Was it possible? Did he have power?

"What did he promise for doing his dirty work?" she continued. "Or maybe he made threats, not promises. Either way, walk out the door and what do you get? Life with Hank Rabon. Life in the land of toads."

"That's it," snarled Hank, grabbing Cedric by his sleeve. "We're out of here, lady. You're crazy. Enjoy the booby hatch." He began pulling Cedric toward the door.

"Go then," Ms. Crazy went on, not raising her voice, "or stay and use your power. Call the Old Man. Tell him what happened. Get me my job back. Then work for me, someone grateful for her job, someone satisfied to see Rabon get what he deserves." With her left hand she lifted the telephone towards him. "Your choice. Toad or prince."

They were halfway through the door when Cedric pulled his arm free and ran back to the desk before Hank could recover. Ms. Crazy handed Cedric the receiver and started dialing.

Hank stormed toward them, yelling for Cedric to put the phone down. Cedric tried to back away, but Hank kept coming and yelling and reached for

him again to drag him out by the throat if he had to.

Crack. The racquet crashed to the desktop sending lead shot flying everywhere. "Shut up," Ms. Crazy said. "He's on the phone. Next time it's your arm."

Hank wavered, looking from Ms. Crazy to Cedric, then bolted for the door, cursing all the way down the hall.

The Old Man answered the phone with a growl. Cedric swallowed hard and looked at Ms. Crazy. Then he told the Old Man everything.

"You did all that?" Ms. Crazy said when he hung up.

Cedric couldn't meet her eyes. "Sorry."

"That took some doing. What did he say?"

"He wants you to come in tomorrow. Looks like you got your job back, Ms. Miner."

She smiled. He risked a small smile himself. He had power. He had stood up to Hank Rabon. He was going to work for a grateful Ms. Jaye-Beth Miner, no work *with*, not *for*. Maybe a raise and a new job title. He cleared his throat discreetly and asked his new boss what duties she might find him suited for.

"Oh," she said pleasantly, "I'm sure we'll think of something appropriate." She smiled, showing all of her teeth. "Something perfectly appropriate. Toad."

FICTION

The Witch and the Vampire

Angela Zeman



"It must be so cool to, like, call up Forces of Evil when you want something done." Daniel's face glowed as he contemplated mastering evil forces.

"Forces of Evil? You talking about a comic book? Besides, if something's evil, what'd you think it's gonna do for anybody?" Rachel gave him a scathing look along with a carton of Styrofoam pumpkins. He began clumping the pumpkins absentmindedly onto the middle window shelf.

Rachel knocked them back into the box with a sweep of her hand. "That's no display. That's a mess."

Without resentment he began replacing the pumpkins in more attractive groupings, arranging plants between them. "Sorry. It's just that you're such a—a source. I never realized it before."

"Source? Of evil forces?"

"Of information. I want to know what witches do."

Rachel stopped pyramiding pots of bronze chrysanthemums around a tall ceramic black cat, turned to her assistant, and scowled. "Like what?"

"Like cast spells, order demons around, dig up freshly buried bodies in cemeteries—"

"Now why would a witch want a freshly buried body?"

"To drain its blood, don't be dumb, for potions! Or, like, would they hold a seance over a really old grave to communicate with spirits?" He shrugged. "I don't know what they do, that's why I'm asking you." His face was bright with expectation. "And by the way, do those stupid Ouija boards really work?"

"And why would I know?" she asked, knowing very well the answer. She turned back to her work.

"Because you're like best buds with Mrs. Risk. The witch."

Mrs. Risk had been known as the witch of Wyndham-by-the-Sea long before Rachel had been brought to the village three years ago as the bride of Ike Elias, the fishmonger. When he'd died under suspicious circumstances a year later, Mrs. Risk had taken Rachel under her wing—unasked—in order to teach her "better methods of survival."

The mentorship had flourished, although it wasn't without its prickly moments between their two forceful personalities. Rachel now occasionally called herself an apprentice witch, tongue-in-cheek to tease her apprehensive neighbors.

Rachel poked and fluffed at the blossoms she'd banked

against the door to block it open. The glorious Indian summer sun entered and gilded everything in the shop. "Do these questions have anything to do with the fact that Halloween is a few days away?"

"Well . . ." Daniel's uncharacteristic shyness pulled Rachel's attention away from her displays.

"What?" she prodded.

"People figure I have connections, you know? They get expectations when they find out that I'm like your right-hand man around here. Sometimes they think I'm in on the, uh, witch stuff." He ducked his head as if suddenly concerned about the unswept condition of the floor by his feet. He grabbed up a broom and started sweeping with virtuous energy.

Rachel studied him through narrowed eyes, hands on hips. Although he was only a high school junior, he'd named himself truly as her right-hand man. Since she'd hired him, he'd made himself indispensable. He was smart, enthusiastic, hardworking, and incapable of dishonesty. He even loved flowers.

From her lofty position of five years his elder, she speculated whether some high school princess was responsible for Daniel's sudden interest in witchcraft.

Just then, Mayor Harold Harper of Wyndham-by-the-Sea stepped into the open doorway, filling it with his blocky body. Before he could launch his usual "I'm a square guy" politician's grin, Rachel noticed his tension and hoped she knew its source. Elections loomed in early November, and for the first time in two decades, he had a fight on his hands. His opponent, Ms. Audrey Green, Wyndham's former School Board head, had mustered strong support among certain of the villagers.

"Sweetheart, how ya doin'," he effused as he stepped in, taking one of her hands and stretching upward to buss Rachel's cheek. She submitted, but with distaste. Her vote was earmarked for Ms. Green.

"Got any roses today?" He dropped her hand and glanced around at the mums, ivy-draped pumpkins, colorful Indian corn, and dried flower wreaths.

"Always," said Rachel. "What color?"

"Red. How much?"

"Forty a dozen."

He winced. "Okay. Free delivery to my house?"

"Sure," put in Daniel. "Right away, if you want."

Rachel grinned. "Mrs. Harper catch you kissing a babe instead of a baby, mayor?"

"Never you mind. Just give me a card to put in with the flowers."

She waved a hand at the card rack. He picked one, scribbled something, and sealed the envelope before handing it to Daniel with two twenties. Rachel noticed he hadn't included tax, and sighed, nodding to Daniel to go ahead and ring it up as is. The mayor was accustomed to claiming a lot of privileges that weren't his to claim.

At this moment, Mrs. Risk entered the shop, striding long-legged in the impatient way she had, black skirts swirling around her slim ankles. On her arm was the basket containing her cat Jezebel, who liked to ride along on Mrs. Risk's walks.

Rachel giggled. "Lucky you dropped in. Daniel's got some questions for you."

Mrs. Risk beamed at Daniel. "Oh yes? And what are they?"

At the sound of her voice, the mayor turned. To Rachel's surprise, she saw relief wash over his expression at the sight of Mrs. Risk. "Sweet—I mean ah, Mrs. Risk! Hoped I'd run into you this morning!"

Mrs. Risk's eyelids drooped at once over her onyx eyes, and Rachel knew the unnatural warmth of her reception hadn't escaped notice. Not that anything escaped *her* notice. She extended her long fingers to the

major to ward off his kiss. He shook them awkwardly, then dropped them as if they were too hot.

"I'm having a rally tonight, casual, out on Harrington's dock. A little music, some drinks, a few snacks. Whole village's invited. I—ah—thought you might consider attending as my guest of honor, and maybe—ah—maybe you'd say a few words."

"On your behalf?" asked Mrs. Risk. "For the election?"

"Well, of course. If you—uh, that's the idea. Yes." He fidgeted, which looked odd for a man of his age and bulk. He swallowed hard, shook his head as if trying to squeeze out more words, then finally croaked, "I'd really appreciate it."

Rachel and Daniel stared. His Honor was known for asking favors, but never from Mrs. Risk, about whom he had openly possessed nasty opinions. In turn, Mrs. Risk, who vocalized her own opinions just as freely, at times made remarks stimulating uncomfortable attention in His Honor's direction—against which he always took a stand of injured innocence. Mrs. Risk contemplated Harper in a silence that stretched and stretched.

"Yes, well." He exhaled through pursed lips. "What say, huh?" This was almost

begging, from him. He must need her support desperately, guessed Rachel. Mrs. Risk gazed at him in unblinking examination.

Just before the silence stretched to an unbearable length, Mrs. Risk relented. "Sounds lovely. Thank you for your invitation, Harry." He hated to be called Harry. "But you've caught me at a bad time."

"Oh, you've other plans," he said, waving a thick paw through the air as if dismissing any plans she might have as insignificant. "I could—"

"No, I'm not busy this evening. I didn't mean that. I *could* be there if you can accept the fact that I support your opponent, Ms. Green, and that if I attend your event, I will say as much to your guests, loudly and often. Under those circumstances, I'd be happy to attend."

Harper ground his teeth together. "What do you have against my being Wyndham's next mayor?"

"Why, Harry!" Her eyebrows arched as if in surprise at such a question. "Your fondness for commercializing any aspect of Wyndham when it adds to our village budget and eventually swells your salary, even if it downgrades our quality of life. Your disregard of the health

and well-being of our wildlife and environment. Plus, you've proved time and again that you can be ruthlessly expedient when you want something. Care to hear more?"

As Rachel and Daniel stared in fascination, the glowering mayor quivered where he stood, his complexion evolving from red to deep purple. Rachel wondered if his head was going to explode.

Then abruptly his color receded, and he pointed a stumpy finger at a pile of tiny, tagged, cellophane-wrapped bags of grassy material that lay next to the cash register. "What is that?"

Rachel blinked, disoriented by the sudden question and change of subject. She swiveled to look where he pointed. "The herbs? They're . . . they're herbs," she finished helplessly.

"You're promoting witchcraft!" he boomed, an evangelistic note in his pronouncement.

"No, I'm not. Besides, what if I did? It's Halloween," said Rachel. "I *am* in a business that's heavily into holidays."

"You're responsible for this," he accused Mrs. Risk with a sneer.

"Yes, I supplied the herbs," she agreed, shrugging. "What of it?"

Rachel shook her head. "I asked her to bundle up a variety of herbs for me, with explanatory labels. She did it as a favor."

Mrs. Risk said, "It's herbology, not witchcraft, if that's your objection. To allow others an opportunity to sample in a small way the benefits of a natural life as opposed to employing polluting chemicals—"

"Don't sell me your hokey 'natural' shtick," growled Harper. "Ordinarily I look the other way when you push your *unnatural* weeds or creepy advice on my people, but this season—" and to everyone's amazement, he shivered ostentatiously.

"It isn't just me, either," he continued. "Everyone feels it. They're all going around looking over their shoulders and jumping if somebody talks too loud."

"I've noticed it, too," put in Daniel. Mrs. Risk looked skeptically at Daniel.

"But why?" Rachel asked.

Mayor Harper started to answer, but Daniel interrupted. "Guys are saying that strange things've been happening ever since that meteor shower we had a few nights back."

"Meteor shower? What could that do?" asked Rachel.

Mrs. Risk, her black eyes gleaming as she gazed at the

mayor and her voice mischievously taunting, answered, "Any atmospheric disturbance further agitates spirits that, in this case, would already be restless because of the advent of Halloween."

"Not true," scoffed Harper in an oddly high voice. Mrs. Risk shrugged. Harper blustered, "I hereby go on record to say I disapprove of your promoting these dangerous ideas."

Mrs. Risk's eyebrows rose. "Herbalism?"

"All of your nonsense. My people don't need this kind of upsetting *occult* influence."

"Your people?" Rachel asked in a voice tinged with sarcasm. "'Occult' influence?"

"Yes. Things have happened already because of *you*!"

The "you," Rachel realized with consternation, was aimed at Mrs. Risk.

The mayor resumed, "Like the desecration that occurred in one of our historical cemeteries last night. I don't know if you read your paper this morning but—"

"I read it," Rachel stated flatly. Mrs. Risk insisted she read newspapers every morning as part of her "education," but she didn't tell this to the mayor. "The old Van Schull cemetery. Two tombstones were shifted around and—" she broke off and gazed suspi-

ciously at Daniel. His face suddenly became angelic with innocence as he gazed back. She suppressed an urge to laugh. There *had* to be a girl behind this.

Mrs. Risk made an inelegant noise. "A few old tombstones pushed mere inches does not amount to desecration, mayor. A little harmless excitement—" a flicked wink at Daniel spurred him into a flurry of sweeping "—and pray God the quest for thrills precipitates nothing more harmful than *that*."

Mayor Harper curled his lips into a snarl. "It upsets my people. I intend to put a stop to it and make sure the perpetrator is severely punished. This is a Christian community. Occultism is an abomination!"

With a second abrupt change of mood, Mayor Harper beamed a cheery farewell to Rachel, sidling out past Mrs. Risk without acknowledging her any further.

The moment he was out of earshot, Rachel turned to the witch—who stood deep in thought—in a fury. "That old actor. Did you see how fast he switched from one subject to another? He's up to something, and he thought of it the second he spotted those herbs. And *you!* I *told* you you'd get into trouble with your hammy

'witch of Wyndham' black dresses and the way you butt into people's business. Few people realize that you're actually nice. You've flim-flammed them too much."

Mrs. Risk examined her in surprise. "Why, Rachel, you're upset. I'm in no trouble. I live as I please and do as I like, and I always will. If you're worried on my behalf, don't be. I've done more good for these villagers than even you know, and the mayor less harm than he deserves. I've never asked them for gratitude—"

"And they've never given you any, either," hissed Rachel.

"—but they'd never side against me with such an obviously self-interested windbag as Harper. Public servant, tchah! He obviously considers me some sort of obstruction to his re-election. Since I've done nothing up to now, I can't imagine why he's worried, except that politicians such as he are often paranoid, having so much evidence of their true natures to conceal." She shrugged.

Rachel frowned. "Just don't goad him, like you did about that stupid meteor shower. You're asking for trouble."

"I ask for nothing," insisted Mrs. Risk. "Now, Daniel, what are your questions?"

After a nervous glance at Rachel, Daniel launched with re-

born enthusiasm into his inquiries about witches, which Mrs. Risk greatly enjoyed answering.

Two days later, Mayor Harper stormed into Rachel's shop again, this time shouting as he entered, "Where's that witch? I warned her! Where's —" He started as he nearly collided with the object of his quest, Mrs. Risk.

Rachel gazed from face to face worriedly. Daniel came rushing in from the back alley where he'd been unloading pumpkins from a cart. He moved close to Rachel's side, wiping his hands on a towel and staring wide-eyed.

"What are you howling about?" Mrs. Risk asked calmly. "Are you referring to the events that occurred last night in the cemetery again? That's certainly no—"

"You'll pull no more witchcraft shenanigans, or we'll be having an 'event occur'—" he sneered the words in sarcastic mockery, "—down at the district attorney's office. Or maybe in the lockup if you don't feel like cooperating."

Rachel was shocked. She stepped in front of Daniel.

Mrs. Risk looked incredulous. "Didn't you ever cavort in a graveyard on Halloween with

a pretty girl when you were young, Harry?"

Harper seethed with anger. "Cavort? This is no cavorting, although maybe *you'd* think so. This is disgusting."

"What did they do?" asked Rachel.

"Devil worship," he spat out in a rage. "Drawing diagrams on the ground, disturbing graves, crazy music, girls doing God only knows what. Under the influence of hallucinatory drugs, probably."

"Meaning you don't know, you're only guessing," insisted Rachel furiously. "No, you're hoping. You're trying to smear Mrs. Risk because without her support, you're *losing* your campaign. She's done nothing at all but tell people she's going to vote for Ms. Green, and people respect her opinion. *I'm* voting for Ms. Green. We need less scum on our waterfront."

Mayor Harper turned to Rachel. "You'd better reread your lease before you start talking to *me* like that."

Rachel paled. What did her lease have to do with Mayor Harper? "Get out of my shop!" She started towards him, but he gave her a contemptuous look that somehow stopped her.

He glanced around the flower-crammed shop with exaggerated care. "I always thought this place would make

a great liquor store. These plants, too damp. Probably rotting the floor with all your watering. And bugs. Unhealthy. I'll bet a good inspection could reveal this place of business to be dangerous to customers.

"And that picture of you—open to an obscenity charge." He contemplated Rachel's large nude portrait of herself reclining among colorful blossoms. It had been painted by a famous local artist, and she'd hung it on the wall behind the counter and used it as her logo. Daniel often could be caught mooning over that painting, to Mrs. Risk's distress.

Harper tore his gaze away from the painting. "It could be that you're too much under the influence of this woman here. You're very young; you could change after she's gone." He gave her lush figure a lascivious inspection.

Rachel heard a growl begin in Daniel's throat. She elbowed him to shut up.

Harper returned his attention to Mrs. Risk, evidently considering Rachel dealt with. "We find out who's doing these outrages, they're going to jail. And you with 'em—as instigator. You've got the villagers terrified, so I'm here on their behalf, to stop you. Halloween is in two days—"

"Two nights," corrected Mrs. Risk in a droll tone.

Mayor Harper's face deepened in color. He pointed a stubby finger at her. "No one but me has the guts to confront you, you've intimidated the entire village."

"Uh, mayor," began Daniel hesitantly, his face pale. "Mrs. Risk didn't have anything—"

Rachel elbowed him harder.

Mrs. Risk looked amused. "Is this a new plank in your sagging platform?" And giving a startlingly good imitation of the mayor's speech-making voice, she boomed, "After I inflate this ordinary situation into a problem, watch me solve it by running the evil witch out of town—never mind that the truth is that she's only a threat to *my* reelection! I'm your man to get things done! I suppose it has as much merit as the rest of your rhetoric." She laughed.

This enraged the mayor into speechlessness, but as soon as he recovered his breath, he said in a menacing voice, "We don't like creepy things happening in *our* village. Get out. Leave town now, today, before you're made to go in a veeerrry uncomfortable way." He turned on his heel and left.

Daniel turned to Mrs. Risk with an agonized expression. "I've got to tell you. You don't understand, I'm—"

"Daniel," said Rachel through clenched teeth, "we understand very well. Don't worry about it. You're not the problem." He stopped talking, but his eyes looked bruised.

Rachel's breath came in gasps as she paced, alternately tossing baskets about and ripping fingers through her long curly hair. "Throwing you out of town! It's *our* village, too. I knew he was a snake, but this —" she stopped. "What was that about my lease?"

Mrs. Risk grimaced. "He obviously thinks he has the power to get you evicted, dear. I'll call Bob Blume, the lawyer. He'll look into it for you."

"All of a sudden now I need a lawyer?" Rachel sank down onto a stool behind the counter. "I can't afford a lawyer."

"Bob is a dear, he'd never charge you."

In the ensuing silence Daniel returned to his unloading job, pausing on the way to give Rachel's shoulder a companionable bump with his fist. He looked miserable.

After he left, Rachel's and Mrs. Risk's eyes met.

Mrs. Risk said, "It's not like Daniel to pull pranks, but these are thoroughly harmless, regardless of what Mayor Harper has stimulated the more gullible villagers into believing. It's Halloween, dear. He's young,

his hormones are in a constant uproar." She flicked a dismayed glance at Rachel's portrait and sighed. "He's an admirable young man and daily withstands formidable pressures. We can't allow Daniel to become a victim of Harper's re-election campaign."

"I'll warn him," said Rachel.

Mrs. Risk shook her head. "I think you may consider him warned. He needs no further embarrassment."

Rachel looked around her shop, suddenly exhausted. Then she frowned anxiously at Mrs. Risk. "Are you going to let Harper get away with this?"

"With what?"

"With making you the scapegoat. Like you're some kind of bad influence or something, making people want to get rid of you. You're going to defend yourself, aren't you?"

Mrs. Risk flipped a hand negligently. "Ignore his ravings. He's trying to nullify the effect of my support for Ms. Green. I have no intention of paying him the compliment of taking him seriously."

"Your nasty remarks made everything worse, you know. You deliberately made him madder."

"It would be more precise to say that stating my opinion aggravated him beyond what tiny

reason he possesses . . . but so what?"

"So what? He ordered you to leave Wyndham!" Rachel cried in frustration, which brought Daniel running in again from the alley.

"Never mind, dear," said Mrs. Risk soothingly to him. "She's fine, although a bit flustered at the moment. I must run." And she left.

Early the next day, Mrs. Risk and Rachel were sharing herbal tea and the New York *Times* and other newspapers in Mrs. Risk's cottage—a morning ritual for them—when two visitors arrived unexpectedly at her door. Mrs. Risk admitted them out of the drizzling rain and offered them some tea.

Mayor Harper refused curtly, his umbrella dripping on her stone floor. He'd brought a companion, a trustee of the Village Board, Dr. Villas, who glowered, but mostly at the mayor, it seemed to Rachel. Knowing him, she guessed he resented having been dragged away from his patients at St. Charles Hospital.

"Come sit by the fire, to dry off," she invited.

"Thank you, no. Last night two corpses were found—" began Dr. Villas.

"I know," said Mrs. Risk. "I read it in this morning's paper. Any identification made?"

Mayor Harper cleared his throat loudly and at great length, disliking the way matters had leaped forward without his control. "They were drained of all blood, slit up the middle, and then crudely sewn back up," he intoned ghoulishly.

Mrs. Risk gave him a cool glance. "Yes. I found that aspect fascinating," she said.

"You would," Mayor Harper sneered. "You go too far, Mrs. Risk."

Her expression said she found this statement incomprehensible.

"You know what the villagers fear?" he continued.

"What now?"

"Vampirism!"

Dr. Villas closed his eyes and turned away. Rachel said scathingly, "Vampires are a fairy tale, mayor. Do you believe in leprechauns, too?"

"I mean it, young lady. This is no fiction. If you'd seen the two unfortunate beings, as I did, their—"

Dr. Villas interrupted sharply. "That's enough. No one forced you to view the bodies, Harold. So don't shove the image down their throats."

The mayor gave him an impatient sideways glance, then added, "They say you're not only a witch, but a blood drinker."

"That's ridiculous!" exclaimed Rachel. She turned angrily to Mrs. Risk. "Can't we sue or something? Isn't this libel or—or slander? Call Bob Blume!"

"Calm yourself, Rachel. No one would possibly believe such a flagrant—"

The mayor cut in loudly. "The villagers cower in their beds, fearing you'll choose them as their next victim!"

Dr. Villas winced. "Harold," he began, but was cut off.

Mrs. Risk said, smiling sweetly. "You should cower in your bed, Harry, afraid the villagers might discover your contempt for their intelligence. If you leave my house swiftly, I'll consider not telling them. Otherwise," she shrugged, "I can't be held responsible."

Mayor Harper took a deep, contented breath that confounded Rachel. "You'll see." He chuckled. "C'mon, doc."

Dr. Villas glanced uncertainly at Mrs. Risk, then followed him out.

After she shut the door on them, Rachel turned to Mrs. Risk and said, "He's too happy to suit me. You must see now, you have to do something—"

"Don't be silly." Mrs. Risk laughed. "The villagers might be foolishly going along with this outrageous theory, but not in their hearts. They'll soon re-

call that in all the years I've lived here, I've done them only good. They'll throw this idiot out on his ear in the election." She walked calmly back to her chair, sat down, and picked up her teacup.

Rachel watched her sadly. "In the last two years, you've opened my eyes to so much. Why are *your* eyes closed now?"

"He's stirring up a false crisis, Rachel. Then 'solving' it to make himself look effective."

"Yes!" said Rachel. "But some of the villagers, maybe they don't think you drink blood or anything stupid like that, but they're jealous of you. Just think. Most work hard for a living, not a luxurious one. And here you sit on your fanny, doing whatever you feel like—as you keep telling me—not working a day in your life. Nobody, not even me, knows how you can afford it."

"That's no one's business but my own," said the witch distinctly.

"I'm not denying it. But it makes people jealous. And most of 'em *are* scared of you. You're an intimidating person. You've gotten some out of scrapes, sure, but sometimes you've interfered without being asked and caught them at something underhanded."

Mrs. Risk said softly, "Rachel, to take care only of oneself

is like living only partly awake. To offer what one can to those who need, is to live—really live—a spiritually balanced life. Very few understand that, if they even bother to give it a thought. But that's their problem, I can't make it mine. I have much to give, so I give it."

After a long silence, Rachel said, "But that doesn't change the fact that Harper's harvesting all those old resentments, offended egos, and fears. And you're letting him."

Mrs. Risk stared into the fire. Rachel took a deep, ragged breath. "Maybe this meteor shower has done a lot worse than stir up imaginary spirits. Maybe it's robbed you of your common sense. Listen, I've got to go. I can't—" Fighting back tears, she grabbed up her jacket and fled.

Later that morning, as the rain stopped and the sun again lit the colorful fall landscape, Mrs. Risk took up her basket. Her cat Jezebel hopped inside, and they went for a stroll through the village. Through Mayor Harper's village—his possessive words came back to her, but she shook the thought away. *Her* village.

Instead of choosing the short route along the strip of beach that edged Wyndham Bay, she took the longer way, the road that led past her neighbors, so

she could greet them, gossip with them . . . be friendly.

The first person she saw was the mailman. As she approached, she saw his expression become anxious. Before she could advance within speaking distance, he baffled her by hopping into his truck, starting its engine, and driving away.

Nearer to town, the road became bordered with boardwalks. She strolled down the boardwalk on the bay side, and as she progressed, people kept crossing to the opposite side of the road when she came into sight. Jezebel poked her head out through the flap opening of the basket and yowled, almost as if she could feel the mounting tension surrounding them. When Mrs. Risk crossed the road to the side lined by the stores, people disappeared into this doorway or that, melting out of her path.

Abruptly, Mrs. Risk stopped and peered down the newly deserted boardwalk. She stood for a moment, stroking Jezebel's sleek head, then whirled and returned home, this time taking the shorter, deserted beach path. When she came finally back to her cottage, she disappeared inside, shutting the door silently behind her. She stayed indoors for the rest of the day.

Inside, she phoned a few friends. "It's Halloween Eve. I have some bordeaux that want sampling," she said. She tried not to be but was still surprised when only two would come. Aisa Garret and Ernie Block.

After dinner and after four burgundies of varying pedigree and vintage had been sampled and judged, the three of them gathered in front of her fireplace with coffee. The evening had passed uneasily.

A smile creased old Aisa's face. "Good dinner. Two of those wines are real finds, I compliment you. Now. What're you going to do about this mess Harper has created around you, my dear?" He asked the question offhandedly, and seemed preoccupied with examining the label of a bottle of cognac twice his age. Ernie fiddled restlessly with his coffee cup, which he had balanced on the apex of his pot belly. He nodded his agreement with Aisa's comments and watched Mrs. Risk sharply out of the corner of his eye.

Aisa, who was widowed and childless and the retired owner of North Shore Industries Corporation, was one of Mrs. Risk's oldest and closest friends and knew more about her than anyone else in Wyndham, although he wasn't telling.

Ernie was a local building contractor in his late fifties and her devoted friend—a kind-natured personality who concealed a shrewd intelligence under his Giants cap. She and Aisa were teaching him about wine, so he was often invited to share wine tasting opportunities.

"What mess?" she answered negligently.

"Oh, don't sidestep me, there's trouble all right. Rachel told me all about it. And if she hadn't, I still would've known. Who could avoid the hysteria the mayor is dispensing as fast as he can round the village? So don't give her any grief for snitching," Aisa said firmly, forestalling her rising protests. "Blood-sucking. Vampirism. Theatrical idiocy." He snorted in disgust.

"This isn't my doing. All I did—"

Aisa finished smoothly, "All you've done is exist, which has always irritated Harold. In the first place, without lifting a finger you've power and authority he must win in elections. In the second place, that authority has made you perversely valuable to his last ditch reelection scramble. Murky situation."

"Murky's a good word for it," put in Ernie suddenly, his nose wrinkling in disgust.

She mused, "I keep wondering who those two poor souls were. It's odd the police haven't been able to discover anything about them."

"Now, there you've put your nose on it," said Ernie. "If you could figure out the story behind those two bodies . . ."

"He's right," said Aisa. "You'd not only find the poor, ah, gentlemen a decent resting place, you'd expose the mayor's foolishness—"

"The foolishness of the whole village," put in Ernie. He poured himself more coffee.

"—for the inflammatory, self-serving hogwash that it is," finished Aisa. "I believe I'll have a drop of the cognac after all. Ernie?" Ernie shook his head, so Aisa served himself.

Mrs. Risk said, "This is all too ridiculous. The police are more than competent to trace identities, with their databases and . . ." She waved a hand in the air, signifying vast resources. "They'll figure out how those two men died, and why, and how they ended up here. So let them do it. The mayor is *not* going to manipulate me into lifting a finger that I personally don't wish to."

Aisa swirled his cognac around in the big-bellied snifter and scowled. "Pride, eh? Can't stoop to fight back?"

"Tchah!" spat Mrs. Risk. "Give me a decent foe! He's the worst sort of cheap clown."

"Decent foe?" Ernie looked puzzled. "I think Harper's about as mean a foe as you could get. He doesn't care whose life he ruins as long as he gets his way. And he just might ruin yours if you don't stand up for yourself."

"If you won't do battle for yourself, then think of Rachel and Daniel," added Aisa quietly.

"They don't need me. They've got Bob Blume," she said.

"And who've those two poor dead guys got?" asked Ernie, but Mrs. Risk refused to answer.

"So, as this is a battle not of your own picking, you'll go down in flames, but noble flames, is that it?" asked Aisa.

"You make me sound silly," she said sullenly.

Ernie added, leaning towards her, "If we could take care of it for you, we would. But Aisa and me, we got no clue what to do. It's like fighting a marshmallow man when you fight people's opinions. Hate to tell you, but you're the only one equipped for a thing like this."

"You're making too much of it," said Mrs. Risk, rising. "I don't wish to discuss it any further." And with Aisa's and Ernie's anxious gaze on her, she

began clearing away the glasses.

Halloween dawned grey and chill. Rachel called, declaring herself unable to come for her morning tea and newspapers, making an excuse so transparently false that it left Mrs. Risk feeling unanchored. She fretted and paced, fiddled with her bird feeders, and tramped among her trees, inspecting their health and well-being for the coming winter with a total inability to remember from one second to the next what she'd just observed. "Soon I'll be squatting in some corner, picking my toenails and screaming," she growled at a blue jay. It gave a bone shivering shriek and fled.

A mist was gathering over the Sound. She pulled her thick shawl tighter around her and let the air cool her strangely hot cheeks. A moment later, she sighed and returned to her cottage. She picked up her basket and called to Jezebel, who daintily sprang into its wool-lined depths, and together they set off for the village.

She entered St. Charles Hospital and descended to the morgue by way of the fire stairs. After obtaining the pathologist's permission, she asked the attendant to show

her the two bodies that had been found. In seconds, she was gazing at two waxen faces. Both were male, one was heart-breakingly young, the other of advanced middle age. After a brief inspection, she stared off into space, her expression thoughtful.

Using the wall phone, she dialed the hospital operator and asked for Dr. Villas to be paged and asked to come to the morgue. He arrived looking annoyed. She uncovered the two bodies.

"Yes, yes, I've already seen them," he said testily.

"Look again, Dr. Villas."

To please her, he looked, but with only an impatient glance. "I must get back—"

"Doesn't something about them seem familiar?"

He became outraged. "If I knew them, I would have said so when they were found," he said, seething. "Of what are you accusing me? Maybe Harper's right. Our village doesn't need a busybody like you." He stamped away, smacking the door with his fist.

When the pathologist came in to see what had upset Dr. Villas, Mrs. Risk, ignoring his nervous inquiry, asked, gesturing towards the two bodies, "Tell me, doctor, don't these two seem oddly familiar to you?"

He stopped in his tracks, stared at her with widening eyes, then turned and fled.

Mrs. Risk stood and gazed after him in perplexity. After some moments, she realized the attendant was hovering outside, unwilling to enter while she was still there, so she left him to his peaceful charges.

A few blocks away, she visited another morgue, this time the village newspaper's. She muttered as she searched, complaining to Jezebel (for lack of human listeners—the newspaper employees had taken an early lunch break en masse upon her arrival) about the lack of space in her cottage; otherwise she'd keep her own file of back issues, for she did find them immensely useful.

After finding what she wanted, she began walking home. Now people openly fled the boardwalk at her approach. One teenage boy shouted at her retreating back in mock bravery, "Get outa here! Leave us alone!"

Her steps faltered for only one second. She pressed her lips firmly together and, looking inadvertently even more formidable, walked faster. "This Halloween is proving evil indeed, my Jezebel," she murmured. Jezebel kept her head inside the basket and made no sound.

Once home, she found that intruders had visited in her absence. The ancient oaks sheltering the path to her cottage had been hacked and gouged. She groaned involuntarily as she touched gaping wounds with trembling fingers. Jezebel, feeling the anguish of her mistress, leaped from the basket and padded towards the house.

In a second, Mrs. Risk heard yowling, followed by a hiss. She rushed up the path, only to stop in front of a white cloth-covered cardboard box placed on the ground about five yards from the house. In addition, her doorstep was covered with a glutinous mass of smashed, rotted pumpkin. Its stink filled the glade. Jezebel, however, faced a large shrub. She hissed and spat, her back arched.

Mrs. Risk commanded, "Come out!" Jezebel yowled again.

Ernie rose sheepishly, a spade in hand. He considered her silently from the center of the bush until she relaxed with a sigh.

"Do you really know what you're doing?" he asked as he crawled out from the prickly branches, his fascination at this new aspect of her distracting him in spite of himself.

"You'd better hope you never find out."

She turned back and inspected the cardboard box as if expecting cobras to slither out. Instead, the cloth lifted away to reveal a pot of chili, some bread, and a pie. A note pleaded with Mrs. Risk to regard the Frazier family kindly, promising similar offerings weekly from now on in return for not cursing them. She dropped the note as if it burned her hand. With ashen complexion, she backed away from the container.

Ernie was horrified to see tears well in her eyes as she looked up at him. "They think I might hurt them."

He followed her and Jezebel into the cottage. As she dropped limply into a chair, he built a sturdy fire, then pulled curtains across each window. After washing the foul pumpkin mess from the door and disposing of the box of food, he dug noisily in the kitchen and returned with a pot of hot tea and cups. He poured, but she didn't move to take it. Jezebel huddled close to the fire and shivered.

They sat for an hour before she spoke, and then she spoke without moving, startling him. The tea lay cold on the stone floor.

"I'll leave Wyndham," she said in a lifeless voice.

"You can't leave." He tried to sound firm, only managing to sound desperate. "I'll stay by you. Nobody'll bother you with me around."

She looked up at him. "And how did these—these—things get to my cottage, then?"

"I came after. I saw some strange cars coming out of your lane, got worried. When I saw what they'd done, I got a spade from my truck—"

"Where is your truck? I didn't see it."

"Park it over at the next place. Nobody there to care."

She nodded, having already lost interest. She looked down at her lap broodily and patted her skirt. Jezebel twitched to attention, then leaped up. Mrs. Risk stroked Jezebel's fur.

She leaned back in her chair, her hand motionless on Jezebel's tiny powerful shoulders. "Maybe I've been here too long."

Ernie picked up the pot and untouched cups, took it all back to the kitchen, and returned with a bottle of cabernet sauvignon and two wineglasses.

"Don't often drink in the middle of the afternoon, but maybe this's better'n tea right now." He uncorked it inexpertly, then poured into the glasses. "The trouble with you is, you're too smart," he said.

Mrs. Risk flicked him a glance from beneath her lowered lids. She smiled faintly as she took her glass. She breathed in the aroma, then took a sip. Some of her color seeped back into her cheeks.

"You watch out for others so doggoned much, maybe you haven't been noticing yourself lately. If you had, you'da noticed that you're not near so independent as you pretend to be."

Mrs. Risk looked startled, but she listened as she drank more wine.

"Ma'am, you're sort of phony, lookin' at it this way. I mean—" he stopped in frustration. "Hang in there, give me a minute."

She smiled at him affectionately and began stroking Jezebel again. Jezebel purred, her eyes closed.

"Well, it's that . . . you don't know it, but you love us."

Mrs. Risk blinked at him in astonishment.

He continued doggedly. "You got a thing for people, that's why you butt into our affairs, help anybody who asks for it, and do the wackiest things I ever seen. But smart. Really smart. I'd never think of half the stuff you do. And the world needs people like you. Wyndham needs you. And you belong here, to us."

"They don't want me," she said bitterly. "Whether or not I stay, this lesson will not pass unlearned. I will never again interfere, or try to change events for the better. That's been a joke. On me. A sick, sad, sour joke."

Ernie frowned. "I guess I'm lousy at explaining things. You're not getting it."

They sat in a tense, unhappy silence. After a long while, Ernie sighed, said, "Well, you gonna let Harper get away with this one last thing before you quit?"

"What difference would it make?"

He shrugged but glanced at her with narrowed eyes. "I could mention that Wyndham sure could use a new mayor. But . . . it also might keep your trees alive."

Tears sprang into her eyes. "Human beings are capable of the most incredible stupidities."

"God's truth, ma'am."

The fire, untended, began to go out. After watching it for some minutes, Mrs. Risk sighed. "I feel so tired, Ernie. May I ask you a favor?"

"Anything."

"Would you drive me somewhere?"

"When?"

"After I make some phone calls."

Ernie stood up. "I'll get us a snack."

She turned and picked up the phone. In about forty minutes, between bites of sandwich, she elicited the information she wanted. She hung up.

"Now," she said.

At the Berg University School of Medicine in Queens, Mrs. Risk and Ernie found the maintenance garage. Here were stored the vans, lawn equipment, and other practical detritus of the school.

Ernie, who'd been primed by Mrs. Risk, called out to the only person they found in residence, "Insurance. Came to ask some questions." He held up a clipboard and clicked his ballpoint pen. "'Bout the missing truck."

The man wore a khaki one-piece uniform with the name of the school embroidered over one pocket. His workbench was littered with pieces of greasy metal. "The van? No insurance company's involved, far's I know," he answered, gazing at them with suspicion.

Ernie looked nonplussed. Mrs. Risk said rapidly, "Administration changed their minds. Now we have claim forms to fill out."

The man rolled his eyes as if disgusted with such vacilla-

tion. "I turned in my report to the provost yesterday."

"Yeah, but we have to ask some other stuff," insisted Ernie.

The man shrugged. "Ask." He picked up a chunk of metal and began wiping it with a rag.

"Theft occurred on October twenty-ninth, right? After dark?"

The man nodded.

"Where was the driver when the van was stolen?"

"At the diner in Suffolk County. Didn't you *read* the report?"

"Yeah, but we couldn't tell if he was at the diner when the van was stolen, or if that's just where he used the phone to report it."

"Both. They'd stopped to eat supper. There was two drivers," the man said.

"What was the name of the diner again?"

The man looked annoyed, so Ernie pleaded, "I don't have your report *with* me, for cryin' out loud. I gotta fill this out *now*."

"The Porthole Diner. In Elm-dale. On Highway 14."

"And they were coming back from where?"

The man exhaled in exasperation. "East End Hospital. Good thing you don't work here. Efficiency is everything.

Do it right the first time, or that's it."

"Tight ship, huh?" asked Ernie companionably.

"Fired both guys that same night. Expensive van, just like that one." He gestured at a new van parked thirty feet away. It was a pale cream color, unmarked with any logo.

"And the two drivers' names?"

"Frank Ivers and Julio Gravez."

Ernie laboriously spelled out their names on his form. "Where they now?"

"Got me. Collecting unemployment somewhere." The man grinned. "Left the keys in the ignition. Tried to deny it, but no keys on 'em when they were picked up."

"Picked up by the cops, you mean?"

"Cops? No, by somebody from the school who drove out to pick 'em up. Told you. No insurance claims, no cops, they wanted it kept—hey, let me see your credentials."

"Never mind that," said Mrs. Risk crisply. "Just direct us to the provost."

He looked abashed, and led them to the Administration Building.

With her hand on the provost's office doorknob, Mrs. Risk thanked the maintenance man for his help and said they

would continue by themselves. He left. Seconds later, she and Ernie left also.

At the nearest phone booth, she called her friend Homicide Detective Michael Hahn of Suffolk County's 6th Precinct. After conducting a computer search to answer her question, he connected her with New York City Police Detective Klinger, the officer from a Brooklyn precinct in charge of the case about which she desired information. After a three-way conversation, complete with reassurances from Detective Hahn to Detective Klinger about Mrs. Risk's peculiar but reliable habits, they agreed to meet in the parking lot of the Porthole Diner as soon as possible. Detective Michael Hahn was coming out of curiosity.

When all had arrived, Michael hailed Ernie, whom he knew from evenings at Mrs. Risk's. After the introductions were completed, Mrs. Risk directed Detective Klinger to go into the diner and to ask a certain question. Minutes later, he returned.

"Just like she said," he told Detective Hahn, wonder in his voice. "That blue Pontiac's been here since the night the van disappeared."

Michael grinned.

Klinger paused to radio someone. When he was through, he commented, "Manhattan plate. Not reported stolen. Yet."

"Oh, I doubt it's stolen," said Mrs. Risk.

Klinger continued, "Since it's a fairly nice car, they figured they'd give the owner a couple of days. If he didn't come for it by then, they'd have it towed. Happens occasionally, they said. Someone leaves a car overnight or whatever. They're open twenty-four hours a day, seems safe, they guess."

He turned to Mrs. Risk. "Okay. I've played along, now what's the connection to my fur robbery?"

Mrs. Risk nodded. "The fur shipment in question was hijacked by two men in a van early this morning, correct?"

Klinger nodded.

"So let's reconstruct events. On the twenty-ninth, the would-be thieves, after learning about a fur shipment that would be trucked through Brooklyn on the thirty-first—today—left Manhattan to find a truck or van in which to transport the furs once they were stolen. Their own car wouldn't hold enough furs, and besides, it was theirs and could be traced. They gave themselves the extra day to find just the right vehicle. Beginning as

far away from Manhattan as they could conveniently get—Long Island's east end—they probably scouted the various mall and diner parking lots, which are wonderful places to find a vehicle to steal.

"They must've been delighted to spot the keys left in the ignition of the med school's van. They parked their car for later retrieval in the busiest section of the diner's large lot, where they thought it wouldn't be noticed. It's safer here than left unattended in Manhattan, certainly.

"The van already had a cargo, which they resolved to ditch on the first stretch of dark road they encountered—which definitely describes Highway 14 as it passes through the south edge of Wyndham. Not a street lamp anywhere, and no open businesses after six in that area—it must've seemed the ideal spot."

She smiled. "Imagine their shock, however, when they found that the unwanted baggage was not a 'what' but a 'who.' Two of them, in fact."

"The two dead men?" ventured Ernie.

"Two cadavers being transported to the medical school from East End Hospital for use by students in dissection," she said. "That possibility should have occurred to any *observant*

medical man as soon as he spotted the condition of the autopsied corpses."

Ernie shuddered, and young Klinger wrinkled his nose in distaste. Only Michael looked unbothered. Homicide had hardened him to much worse.

"So they pitched them out," said Michael cheerfully.

"Well, yes, after they took care of a small problem."

"What?" asked Michael.

"Body bags. They had to remove the bodies from them. The van was unmarked, which was one reason why they took it, but the black zippered body bags customarily used in these instances were stamped with the school's name. They couldn't leave the bags behind to point out the direction in which they were traveling . . . from Elmdale to Wyndham is a straight line towards Brooklyn. The theft wasn't slated for another thirty-six hours, and it would be a nuisance to have to steal another van if this one was traced. They counted on the two dead men's not being connected with a van theft—at least, right away."

"So they had to remove the bodies from those bags. I hope it gave 'em nightmares," said Klinger, laughing.

"Yeah, well, their nightmares became Mayor Harper's dream," said Ernie in a voice

rumbling with anger. "He used the weird condition of the bodies to push Mrs. Risk out of Wyndham."

Michael looked shocked. "What's this?"

Ernie explained. Michael's normally soft blue eyes acquired a chilling hardness.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Now we wait," said Mrs. Risk. She seemed unexcited. "I regret not exerting myself sooner, or we might've been able to catch them in the act this morning. They should be returning soon. The van would be too dangerous to keep any longer than necessary," she commented to Klinger. "They probably kept it only long enough to take them to the nearest public transportation—the safest and easiest way to travel back to their own car. I'd search for the abandoned van in the bus or railway parking lots nearest the Port Authority in Elizabeth, New Jersey, if I were you. As you know, stolen goods frequently change hands in that area."

"It's a three hour journey by train from Elizabeth to here, and longer by bus," she continued. She glanced at Ernie's watch. "After the theft, they needed time to get to New Jersey. Time to sell the furs and ditch the van, and time to catch some type of public transporta-

tion. They should be arriving soon." She settled back to wait, leaning tiredly against the side of Ernie's truck.

Klinger immediately flicked the switch on his portable radio unit and gave instructions to the dispatcher about Elizabeth.

After a few moments of puzzled shuffling, Detective Klinger cleared his throat. "Mind if I clear up a few points while we wait?"

She shrugged.

"How'd you connect the bodies with the medical school?"

"The newspapers."

"But no one reported any bodies missing, just found."

"Exactly. No men were reported missing, dead or even alive, who fit their description. Who would lose two bodies without a report or alarm of some kind? Only those who would want to conceal the loss. And these men had obviously been dead long enough to be autopsied, which directed my attention to the medical profession. A medical school, which accepts bodies donated by grieving relatives, would cringe at receiving the kind of publicity engendered by having the dearly departed callously dumped by the side of a road. Donations would cease."

Klinger nodded. "And when you questioned the medical

schools, looking for one who misplaced some cadavers—"

"Some ridiculous lies exposed the guilty party."

"And you deduced the van's existence?"

"Well, the bodies weren't wanted. Something was. It must have been the transport. And why that particular vehicle? Maybe because it was of a certain size or type, useful for transport of goods that would fill it. Stolen van, stolen goods."

"And since the time would necessarily be kept short to reduce the chances of discovery—" began Detective Hahn.

Mrs. Risk nodded. "The theft must have been imminent. I called you to research the latest thefts in the New York area, probably on or near Long Island, and this fur theft fit perfectly—timing, size of booty, location."

Detective Klinger sighed happily. "It's a pleasure doing business with you, Mrs. Risk."

She gave him a sad smile.

Ernie and Michael exchanged worried frowns.

In less than forty-five minutes, a taxi pulled into the lot and disgorged two young men.

"How many people visit a diner by taxi?" murmured Mrs. Risk.

One man paid the driver, while the other sauntered to-

wards the Pontiac. He rummaged in his pocket for the key.

The arrest took seconds.

Detective Klinger, after effusive thanks to Mrs. Risk, took matters into his own hands. Ernie drove Mrs. Risk back to her cottage, with Michael following.

When she stepped down from the high seat of Ernie's truck, she paused and clung to the door, scanning the cottage front. As if Ernie read her mind, he swiftly said, "Nobody's been here since we left."

Upon entering her cottage, she immediately sank into her chair by the unlit fireplace as if oblivious to the dark. Ernie bustled around, lighting lamps, candles, and the fire, tending it until it became huge and hot.

Michael pulled up a chair next to Mrs. Risk's. Ernie whispered to Michael, "Wouldn't talk all the way home." Michael grimaced.

"Some wine?" Ernie asked her. She shook her head. His eyes grew wide as he glanced with significance at Michael.

"So you're leaving town," said Michael mildly.

She nodded.

"Giving up all the friendships you've made, all the nurturing you've done to make this village a good place to live."

She sat motionless.

"You know, Ernie, I'll take some of that Silver Oak '82 cabernet I see in the rack. Want some?"

"Sure," said Ernie.

"Bring two glasses," said Michael with a wink. Ernie found the bottle, opened it, and brought back three brimming glasses. He put the third one on the floor beside him as he sat down.

Michael sipped. "Mmmm. How're you going to move that wine cellar of yours? Ernie just doubled its size for you, too. You haven't filled it yet, have you?"

"Think you're clever, do you?" she asked sourly.

Unperturbed, he went on. "Jezebel'll probably stay. Live with the new owners. Cats hate change."

She looked startled. "New owners of what?"

"Of your cottage." He smiled brightly, took a swig of wine practically in her face.

After a small hmpff, she turned her attention back to the fire.

"Hope the new owners aren't the kind who use pesticides and chemical lawn food, stuff like that. Birds'll all die. Butterflies'll vanish. Your herbs'll be poisonous. Can't make dandelion tea—"

She turned back to him. "Would you shut up?"

"Hey, just reality. Pour me more of that Silver Oak, Ernie. She can't take it with her." He held out his glass.

She shifted, glanced at him. "Don't be such a pig. Pour me some, too."

Ernie handed her her glass.

She sipped, then drew a heavy breath. "I can't let those things matter. This place hates me."

Michael said, "I thought 'the witch' ignored public opinion."

"Nah," said Ernie. "She just never lets on. But they hurt her feelings, this time. Bad."

"Don't talk about me as if I weren't here," she said tartly.

Michael shrugged. "I might as well get used to your not being here."

Ernie continued, "If she could only figure out that she wouldn't be happy anywhere else, that she belongs here no matter what a few yo-yos say, and that—"

She stood up, anger gathering on her face. "I am *here*. Talk directly to *me*."

Ernie forged ahead, "—and that she's gonna have to face the fact that it's more important to be herself than it is to change so that bunch of yo-yos will accept her."

Michael nodded. "To take care only of oneself is like living only partly awake. To offer what one can to those who

need, is to live—really live—a spiritually balanced life.' Didn't I hear her tell somebody that lately?"

"You've been talking to Rachel," she said accusingly. "You knew about this all along."

"Rachel called me right before you did. In fact, your call interrupted hers, that's why Ernie had to fill in the blanks for me."

"A bunch of busybodies—!" she began.

Ernie interrupted. "Guess what she told Rachel was all hot air," he said to Michael.

Mrs. Risk whirled to face Ernie, furious.

He continued, "Poor thing hit a bump in her comfortable road and forgot all the good advice she dishes out—" he grinned broadly into her rage "—with a *shovel*. Whether anybody wants to hear it or not."

He stood up, stepped around her, started to hum under his breath as he went in the kitchen. "I'll fix us some dinner. Better not to drink wine on an empty stomach."

Michael also stood. He went to the phone. "Great idea. I'm going to call the radio station and all the newspapers. They'll want to broadcast the news about Mrs. Risk's solving the riddle of the dead *bloodless* bodies and capturing fur thieves." He chuckled. "A New

York *Times* reporter owes me some favors. I'll allow him to pay me back. Ms. Green just might *like* holding a big press conference explaining how indispensable Mrs. Risk's presence is to Long Island. And we have to mention His Honor's smear campaign. Can't let his part go unmentioned, can we?

A vampire witch . . . he's gonna look like a damn fool."

Mrs. Risk stamped her feet. "What do you two think you're doing?"

Ernie popped his head out through the kitchen door. "It's Halloween, want garlic on your chicken? Great for scarin' away vampires."

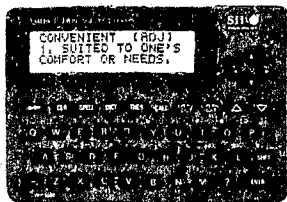
Mrs. Risk laughed.

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Alfred Jugland, the redhaired shipping clerk, killed Jared Judd, his unscrupulous blackmailing employer.

EMPLOYEE	CABIN	POSITION	HAIR	AGE
Alfred Jugland	4	shipping	red	31
Bart Hillman	1	foreman	blond	32
Claude Landers	3	designer	dark	27
Darlene Iverson	6	secretary	red	26
Elvita Gregory	2	accountant	dark	30
Felicia Klembach	5	treasurer	blonde	28

MAIL ORDER MALL



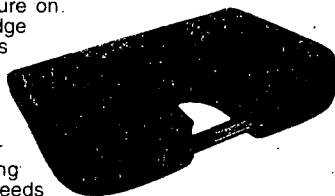
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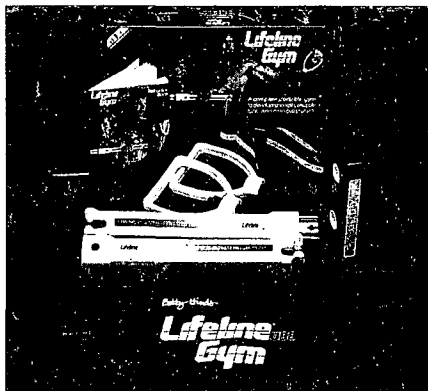
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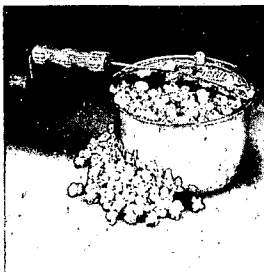
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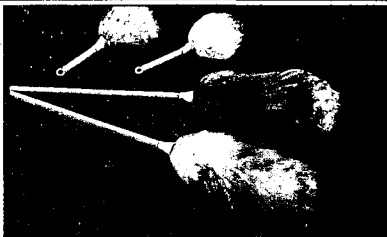


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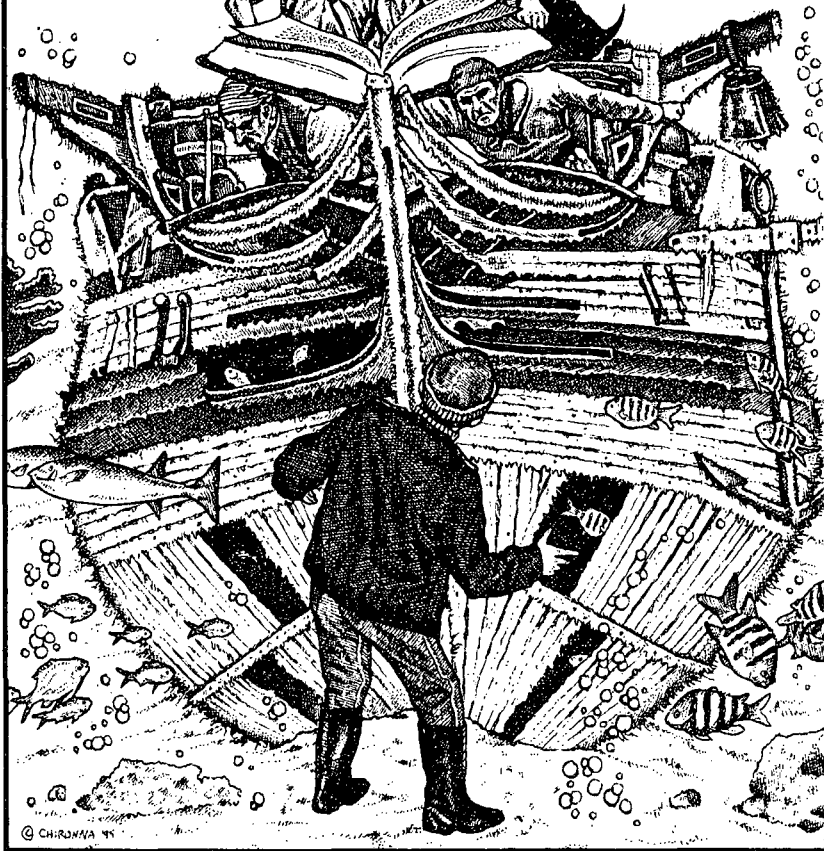


Illustration by Ron Chironna

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“**B**ill Grimes could have wrote a book on prison life in almost every country,” said the seafaring man as, with his little finger, he pressed down the tobacco in his pipe. “And he was a proper hard case, I tell you. Salted, he was, and no mistake. There wasn’t a port from London to Callao by way of east that he didn’t know.

“Now one day Bill Grimes got killed. He was walking along the deck when a block fell from the main-t’-gallant yard and flattened him out. It finished Bill all right, and when they picked him up he was a bloody corpse. He hadn’t been hanged, shot, garrotted, knifed, or guillotined, but just killed by a falling block. Think of that! A man like Bill Grimes dying what you might almost call a peaceful death. And after the life he’d led. Well. . . .

“So the mate fetched out the logbook and found the date and wrote under it, ‘William Grimes, A.B., accidentally killed. Lat. 53. Long. 80.’ And that’s all there was to that. They sewed Bill up in a canvas bag and put a couple of lumps of pig iron at his feet so’s he shouldn’t rise before his time, and then they read some prayers over him—they read ’em quick because there looked to be a squall coming up from the sou’west and the old man was in a hurry to shorten sail. So they give him a shove, and ‘plop!’ overboard goes Bill. Fathoms deep he went, down among the slime and the fishes.

“Now, although Bill was dead and the mate had wrote it in the log all proper and correct, Bill didn’t know he was dead. So when he opened his eyes down there under the green sea, he still thought he was Bill Grimes. Which, of course, he wasn’t, being only the soul of Bill Grimes, y’understand. But he’d never had no religious education, or if he had, he’d forgotten it. Otherwise, I suppose, he’d have knowed he was only a soul and behaved according.

“Well, Bill was a bit puzzled at first, as was only natural. He’d been in some mighty queer places in his time, had Bill, but never in one like this before. There was no sun or wind or clouds, but only a pale green light, something like moonlight; and there was all sorts of fishes, big and little, sailing around in it and staring at Bill in a way that made him feel uncomfortable.

“‘This is a blamed funny country,’ says Bill—for, as I’ve told you, he didn’t know he was dead—‘wonder how in hell I got here?’

“Well, while he was casting around trying to make out his bearings, just as you or I might do, he suddenly catches sight of a man sitting on a keg. He was the queerest looking man that Bill, alive or dead, had ever seen; for he wore a bandanna handkerchief round

his head, and a black patch over one eye, and big seaboots that came up to his thighs, and a pair of wide, loose breeches. And he had a sash round his middle with two pistols stuck in it and a rusty cutlass.

"Hello, you!" says he, cocking his one eye at Bill.

"Hello yourself," says Bill.

"Where do you come from?" asks Black-patch.

"The brig *Nancy Bell*," answers Bill. "Though how the devil I got here, or where I am, I don't know."

"Oh," says the other, "you're down among the Dead Men, that's where you are."

"But I ain't dead," says Bill.

"At that Black-patch starts to laugh. A holler, mocking laugh that would have made Bill's flesh creep if he hadn't been a spirit without any flesh."

"If you're not dead now, you never will be," says he. "We're all dead down here; every mother's son of us."

"Dead!" cries Bill.

"Aye, dead, mate, dead."

"Well, that brought Bill up with a round turn, as the saying is. It wasn't what he'd expected, not by long odds, and it was enough to upset any man. Try it yourself. How would you feel if you, thinking yourself to be alive, was told you were dead? Well, there you are."

"Why, then, I'll never draw no more pay, nor ever see the land again," says Bill, more to himself like.

"Never no more, mate, never no more," sings out Black-patch. "That's all astarn of ye now. You're down among the Dead Men, mate, so cut it adrift, cut it adrift," and he laughs that holler, dead laugh that was worse than a groan.

"Come, come, mate," says he, seeing Bill's mournful look, "cheer up, for you've fallen among mighty good company. There's Sir Henry Morgan and Captain Kidd and Admiral Teach—aye, and hundreds more and worse. This way, mate, and step lively now."

"So Bill, not knowing what else to do, follows the man with the black patch over his eye till they reaches a sort of cave."

"What's your name, mate?" says Black-patch all of a sudden.

"William Grimes," says Bill.

"Rating?"

"A.B.," says Bill.

"Right, now we'll go in," says Black-patch. "But," says he, shaking a skeleton finger at Bill, "take heed, mate, and clew up your

jaw tackle. Don't speak till you're spoken to—not yet.'

"So they went inside, and Bill was surprised to see how big the cave was. In fact, it was that big he couldn't see the end of it, nor yet the sides. And everywhere he looked there were men throwing dice and playing cards and tossing coins and gaming in all the ways that were ever invented. Most of them were smoking, all were drinking, and Bill knew from the smell it was rum hot.

"Well, they were a queer crowd, for some had handkerchiefs round their heads and big seaboots on their legs like the man with the black patch; and some had canvas petticoats and some had rusty breastplates; some had their hair done in tarry pigtails, some had it long and matted, and some had it short. And there were one-eyed men and one-legged men and one-armed men. There were men of all colors; white, yeller, black, and brown, and they sat on kegs or lay on the ground as the fancy took them.

"'Sound the bell,' says someone all of a sudden.

"Black-patch went up to a big ship's bell. It was hung above the foc's'le of what looked to be the wreck of a very ancient ship, all covered with barnacles and seaweed. He strikes it three times with a hammer, and at the sound everyone stops gaming and drinking. Not a man moved.

"Before the sound of the bell had stopped, the door of the foc's'le opened and out come the strangest looking figger of a man that Bill had ever seen. He was ten feet high, and he had a hooked nose and long yeller teeth and eyes like little balls of fire and a horrid grin that made Bill shiver. He climbs onto the foc's'le head, does this queer-looking figger of a man, and sits him down on a big keg. And after him comes a funny little joker with horn spectacles and a brown wig that kept canting to one side of his head. Then he picks up the hammer, does this rum little joker, and strikes the bell with it once.

"'Silence!' he shouts, although, mind you, no one was saying a word. 'Silence for His Grim and Terrible Majesty, Davy Jones!'

"'Who is the new member?' asks Davy Jones in a voice that sounded like he was speaking through a megaphone a mile long.

"Then Black-patch pulls his forelock and does a sort of bow and scrape, and points to Bill.

"'Name?' says Davy Jones, turning his eyes on Bill so that Bill felt as if he was shriveling up.

"'William Grimes, A.B., your honor,' says Bill.

"'Majesty—you should say majesty!' shouts the funny little joker to Bill.

"'Fetch the Log, volume four thousand and eighty-six,' says Davy Jones.

"Then two men came along with the biggest book Bill had ever seen, and the funny little joker started to turn over the pages.

"'G—G—G—,' he mutters, swishing over the leaves. 'Grant, Graham—mum—mum—mum—Grimes—ah, here we are—Grimes, William, A.B. Born Anno Domini one thousand eight hundred and eighty. That you?' he says, looking over the rims of his glasses at Bill.

"'Yes, sir,' answers Bill.

"'What's his record?' says Davy Jones.

"And then the funny little joker starts to read all the crimes and sins that Bill had ever committed, and it took some time to get through, I give you my word. When he stopped to turn over a page, Bill noticed that everyone was looking at him in a pleased and friendly manner. He began to feel quite happy and longed for the moment when he could join the others with a glass of rum hot, a pipe, and a dicebox.

"'Fairly creditable record so far,' says Davy Jones, looking at Bill, 'but nothing to boast about, so don't get stuck up, William Grimes.'

"Then the funny little joker goes on reading:

"'Age thirty-eight, jumped overboard during heavy weather and saved a girl's life.'

"There was a horrible silence and Bill saw that everybody's face had changed, and instead of looking at him friendlylike, everyone was scowling at him. And he sort of knew then that there'd be no rum hot, no pipe, and no dicebox for him.

"'Is that true, William Grimes?' asked Davy Jones in an awful voice. And Bill tried to lie, but the words stuck in his throat.

"'You're a vile impostor, William Grimes!' roared Davy Jones in a voice like a peal of thunder. 'Get you gone, you lubber, this is no place for the likes of you!'

"And then Bill felt a sort of jerk-like and shut his eyes, not knowing what terrible things was going to happen to him. But at last he opened them again, and what do you think he saw?

"He saw a wonderful city all built of white marble: Yes, pure white marble; and the roofs were made of solid gold, and so were the streets. And everywhere there was beautiful angels in white

dressess, flapping their wings and preening their feathers, or flying around as the fancy took them. There was music and singing the likes of which they have in churches.

"Now while he stood there blinking and wondering where he was and what had happened to him, an extra beautiful angel comes up and hands him a golden harp and a golden crown like what he'd often seen in pictures in Sailors' Homes. And then Bill knew where he was.

"William," says the angel, 'welcome to Paradise.'

"And then Bill saw that this angel was the very little girl he'd jumped overboard to save. And he felt proper mad.

"Take your crown and harp!" says he, flinging them as far away as he could, 'I've no use for 'em. If it hadn't been for you,' he says, turning to the angel, 'I'd be with Davy Jones's boys, dicing and drinking rum hot!'

"Well, Bill had no sooner said them words than a great voice said, 'If Paradise ain't good enough for you, Bill Grimes, you can go to Hell!'

"And Bill went. Down he went to a place where there ain't no golden harps nor angels; no, nor dicing nor rum hot neither.

"And that," observed the seafaring man as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, "just shows you."

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Gillian Roberts' Philadelphia schoolteacher, Amanda Pepper, ranks at the head of the class of female amateur sleuths in her latest adventure, **In the Dead of Summer** (Ballantine, \$21). It's another muggy Philly summer, but Amanda is back at her posh private school teaching junior high kids from inner-city public schools. As the temperature heats up, so do racial tensions, followed by outbursts of nasty violence. Threats to a teacher, a drive-by shooting, and finally the disappearance of one of Amanda's students, a Vietnamese girl, begin to look too coincidental. Down-to-earth and sincere about her vocation, Amanda is also blessed with a finely tuned sense of irony and a finely honed wit. Roberts manages to temper the gravity of her theme with sidesplitting commentary and a hearty helping of action. The result is great fun to read.

M. D. Lake's university campus cop Peggy O'Neill boldly goes where most campus cops fear to tread. In her seventh and latest case, **Grave Choices** (Avon, \$4.99), it's directly into the high temple of Art with a capital A. Although Peggy confides that she doesn't "like being a part of putting people in jail, which is ridiculous for a cop—sort of like a bat who's afraid of the dark or a claustrophobic gopher," it is she who identifies Sanchez fleeing a darkened campus building right before she discovers the body of the chairman of the art department. Sanchez had publicly threatened the victim, and the police are satisfied with their arrest. Peggy's friend Sandra Carr is not: she claims that Sanchez, happily married and supporting himself as a potter, is innocent. Peggy's reluctant consent to poke her nose into the business takes her back twenty years to the death of a promising young woman artist,

behind the politics of academia's art department, into the local art scene's private galleries, and finally into the limelited world of the U's fabulous new art museum, with its glitzy fundraisers and celebrity sponsors and cavernous basements. Let a smart-mouthed campus cop guide you through the labyrinthine art world. Peggy O'Neill makes great company on the trip.

Laurie R. King's sequel to the debut of her delightful young heroine and apprentice to the retired Sherlock Holmes is finally here, and it won't disappoint. **A Monstrous Regiment of Women** (St. Martin's, \$22.95) lets readers catch up with the young Mary Russell just weeks before she will come into her majority and her fortune, the day after Christmas, 1920. Mary is struggling with decisions over her future when she runs into a former Oxford classmate who then introduces her to the inner circle surrounding Margery Childe, a feminist and charismatic spiritual leader beginning to make quite a name for herself in London. King's strengths are numerous: her characters are complex and intelligent, her period detail is colorful and lively, and there's heaps of action, whether it be the sophisticated interplay between the bright young narrator and the Master Detective, or Mary struggling to maintain her identity through a grueling period of brainwashing. My only complaint is that I'm probably doomed to wait another year for the next chapter in her life.

Ellie Haskell, the title character in Dorothy Cannell's beloved *The Thin Woman*, returns in her seventh whimsy, **How to Murder the Man of Your Dreams** (Bantam, \$19.95). Not so long ago Ellie found her hero: Ben Haskell, handsome and doting and extraordinarily happy in a kitchen. They wed and set up housekeeping in the charming English village of Chitterdon Fells, and no one was the wiser as to how they met. (Ellie engaged Ben through a London escort service to accompany her to a dreaded family reunion.) These days, however, their toddling twins and Ben's long hours at his new restaurant have driven Ellie to paperback romances, and now her addiction also contributes to keeping the lovers apart. When the local librarian is killed at her post, Ellie and the members of her library committee manage to lure the hottest male cover model, Karisma, to town as part of a fundraising scheme. Meanwhile, love is twisting the fates of others in town, too. A newlywed postman dies suddenly. Ellie's new nanny is fleeing an adulterous husband. Her good friend and lady pastor's husband is about to take a drastic step. And Karisma, wild-maned and bronzed-muscled, shows up with the former owner of the London escort

service! The fat's in the fire called love, and somebody's about to get mortally singed. As always, Ellie's natural hysteria is hysterically funny.

E. X. Ferrars died early this year, leaving mystery fans a legacy of more than sixty novels. One can appreciate her talents as demonstrated in her final book, **A Hobby of Murder** (Doubleday, \$18.95), which features one of her popular characters, retired professor Andrew Basnett. Andrew is now in his seventies, feeling somewhat at loose ends since he's finished writing the book he began when he retired. A change of scene is offered by old friends, the Davidges, who have invited him to spend a week with them in their country house. A dinner party at a neighbor's house, however, ends in murder. This is a cultivated, quiet, and soothing, even old fashioned, book, exactly what one looks for in a British village mystery.

Marissa Piesman's legal-aid attorney, Nina Fischman, is the quintessential New Yorker. She has an eccentric Jewish mother from whom she inherited her smart mouth, if not also her strong opinions on everything from wearing shorts to saying "you're welcome." The plot of **Alternate Sides** (Delacorte, \$19.95) could only come from a Big Apple nightmare. The doorman of an apartment in the East Eighties is murdered. So . . . ? What makes it Nina's business is that the guy was *her* guy's doorman. Worse, he was moving Jonathan's car to the other side of the street (per the alternate side of the street parking laws in Manhattan) when he was shot. Nina happily puts off deciding whether to change jobs and neighborhoods (and who knows, maybe even get married?) by pushing her way into the murder investigation. You don't have to visit New York to get a taste of the Big Apple: just pick up a Nina Fischman mystery.

Annette Meyers' former Broadway gypsy, Leslie Wetzon, climbs back into her leotards in **These Bones Were Made for Dancin'** (Doubleday, \$19.95), and it's a smash. It's been eighteen years since the opening of *Combinations*, a Broadway musical that, with glorious hindsight, experts have now dubbed a landmark. Leslie was then just eighteen and her good friend Carlos was not yet a choreographer, but only a chorus dancer like Leslie. The two are producing a revival of the show in concert as an AIDS benefit, but one of the original dancers seems to have disappeared from the face of the earth. And Leslie's homicide detective lover has just unearthed a long-buried skeleton in a Greenwich Village basement. Meanwhile Wetzon's headhunting partner, the glamorous

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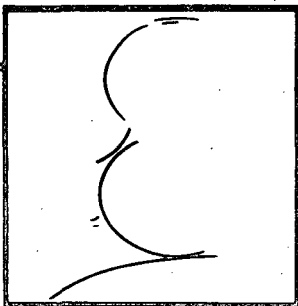
and redoubtable Smith, staunchly defends her tycoon lover even as his heavies plot to ensure that Wetzon never testifies against him to the grand jury. This book would be a hot ticket if only for the insider's take on show biz. But added to a couple of curtain-raising action scenes, a chorus line of suspects, and a fair-play song and dance plot, you have a great night of mystery theater in your own armchair.

Mary Willis Walker's first novel starring Texas reporter Molly Cates won her an Edgar and comparisons to Patricia Cornwell. She's back in **Under the Beetle's Cellar** (Doubleday, \$22.50) with a tale grabbed from today's grimmer headlines. A schoolbus of children (only firstborns) and their driver are kidnapped one morning by cult members controlled by Samuel Mordecai. They are being held in a compound; forty-six days have passed; and officials know their time is running out. A year earlier, for a thoughtful piece she wrote about cults, Molly had actually interviewed Mordecai. So she plunges into his background in an attempt to learn something useful for the negotiators and puts herself in a deadly position, right in Mordecai's line of vision. As Molly hammers away against the clock, Walker also poignantly relates how the bus driver, a Vietnam vet who had turned his back on a violent world, manages to unite the terrified children through strength, imagination, humor, and love. This is a big, ambitious book that deserves a wide audience.

Earl Emerson's Seattle private eye Thomas Black has always been one of my favorite sleuths. Now he's back in **The Vanishing Smile** (Ballantine, \$21), and up against one of the most cold-blooded killers to hit the bookshelves. At its opening, Black is dealing with some very strong and very mixed emotions: his father, a stranger who abandoned his wife and children when Thomas was young, has suddenly reappeared disguised as the houseguest from hell, and Black's true love, Kathy, continues to be estranged and unforgiving. Yet it is Kathy who refers his next clients, two women who want him to complete unfinished business left by the sudden death of their friend, an active seventy-year-old named Marian Wright. The friends were each trying to locate a lost love, allegedly for a bittersweet reunion party. But could her amateur sleuthing have actually led Marian Wright to her death? Black soon discovers a much darker secret tying the trio together, a secret as deadly as Pandora's box. Once he opens it, he runs the risk that he will not only spread its evil far and wide, but also dangerously close to home.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



While he was a candidate for president, Bill Clinton told members of the press that mystery writer Walter Mosley was one of his favorite authors. Now, as president, he can see Mosley's Edgar Award-nominated **Devil in a Blue Dress** on the big screen. And he should be pleased with the results.

Under the direction of Carl Franklin, who also wrote the screenplay, the film captures a post-war Los Angeles rarely portrayed on screen—its vibrant, hardworking black neighborhoods.

It's here that we find Ezekiel "Easy" Rawlins (Denzel Washington), a decorated World War II veteran who owns his own home, drives his own car, and seems to be doing just fine when it comes to the American dream.

Then, through no fault of his

own, his dream is dashed when he loses his job at an airplane factory. Suddenly Easy is staring a mortgage payment in the face with no way to cover it.

Luckily (or perhaps unluckily, as we discover) he encounters DeWitt Albright, a tough-talking, nattily dressed man who tells a wary Easy that he does "favors, favors for friends." Albright (Tom Sizemore) needs someone to find a missing woman. And he's willing to pay one thousand dollars.

With nowhere else to turn, Easy accepts the offer. As a reluctant private eye, this regular, middle class everyman gets drawn into a web of blackmail, murder, and corruption that leads all the way to City Hall.

The forties setting is wonderfully recreated here, from the smoky jazz clubs to the wide-brimmed fedoras and even wider ties. With its voice-over

narration, visual style, and L.A. backdrop, *Devil in a Blue Dress* brings to mind the world of Raymond Chandler.

The object of Easy's search, the deliciously named Daphne Monet (Jennifer Beals), is an elusive beauty who frequents the wrong side of town and keeps company with one of L.A.'s most powerful men.

It seems as if everyone is after Daphne (she's the one in the blue dress). When Easy finally meets her, their relationship is a roller-coaster ride.

While Easy does his best to protect her so he can safely return her to Albright, or to whoever might offer more money, Daphne draws him into a mysterious plot that includes at least two murders that gruff white cops try to pin on him. The cops take Easy downtown too often for his liking while he tries his best to get to the bottom of the story and collect a nice paycheck, too.

When Easy finds himself in danger, he calls on his old pal Mouse (Don Cheadle) for some muscle.

The slender, fast-talking Mouse would just as soon kill you as look at you. And while Easy needs him to protect his rear, Mouse is a little too trigger-happy for his liking.

A simple man who's good at what he does, Mouse is irked

when Easy berates him for killing a man he'd left with him to guard. "If you didn't want him killed, why'd you leave him with me?" he asks with a straight face.

(Although Washington gives a fine performance in this colorful film noir, it's Don Cheadle who steals the show.)

In the end, Easy comes to understand that he's much better off working for himself than someone else; it's no surprise when he sets up shop as a private eye.

The major difference between Mosley's novel and its film treatment is the romance between Easy and Daphne. It's in the book, but not in the movie. The author professes to be pleased with the screenplay, though, saying: "My experience with Hollywood is very clean. I don't have any expectations.

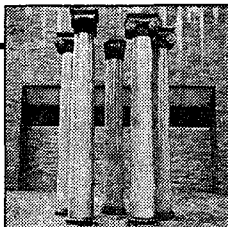
"I feel the way James M. Cain [*Double Indemnity*] did when he was asked about what Hollywood had done to his novels. He said, 'My novels are right here on the shelf.'"

Mosley fans will be happy to know that the rights for two of his other Easy Rawlins books, *A Red Death* and *White Butterfly*, have been purchased by TriStar Pictures, so Easy may see the big screen again.

But if not, you know where to find him.

THE STORY THAT WON

The July Mysterious Photo-Terrill L. Burlison of Kent, mentions go to Barry Bald-Canada; Pat Popelier of East DeGroat of Theresa, New Ingram, Texas; Alberta Moeller Art Cosing of Fairfax, Vir-Arbor, Michigan; R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; John Dwyer of Stoneham, Massachusetts; Raymond McGlynn of Los Angeles, California; and Roz Avrett of New York, New York.



graph contest was won by Washington. Honorable win of Calgary, Alberta, Moline, Illinois; Julie G. York; J. S. McCarty of of Williamsville, New York; ginia; Robert Kesling of Ann

MONUMENTAL MISTAKE by Terrill L. Burlison

Lucian leaned against a tree, gazing at the five marble columns and the golden frieze crowning them. He took a long pull at his flask, then passed it to his companion.

"Strong wine," Sullus said, wiping his mouth.

"Yes, thank the gods—and local winemakers." Lucian scowled at the monument painted blood-red by the setting sun. "What a forsaken place! The next time you want to bed a centurion's daughter, do not expect my assistance."

"There are worse stations than guarding Trajan's Monument."

"Yes, but none more boring."

Night fell. The flask grew lighter and Lucian's eyelids heavier. Sullus's snores reminded him of the crashing waves at his home in distant Sicily. The dream-song of the sea . . .

He awoke, the morning sun stinging his eyes. Crawling to his feet, he noticed Sullus curled nearby and kicked him awake.

"Get up, you lazy goat! Our replacements will soon . . ." Lucian glanced up, and his voice faded to a whisper.

The columns pointed skyward like the fingers of an empty hand. The golden frieze was gone.

"What devilry—" Sullus whispered.

"Not the devil; the Vandals!" Lucian pointed to the tracks of a great wagon that had come and gone during the night.

"Why did they not kill us?"

"Because they are too evil."

"Our replacements will be here at midday! What shall we do?"

Lucian stared southward, toward the glimmer of the distant sea. "I hear Carthage is beautiful this time of year."

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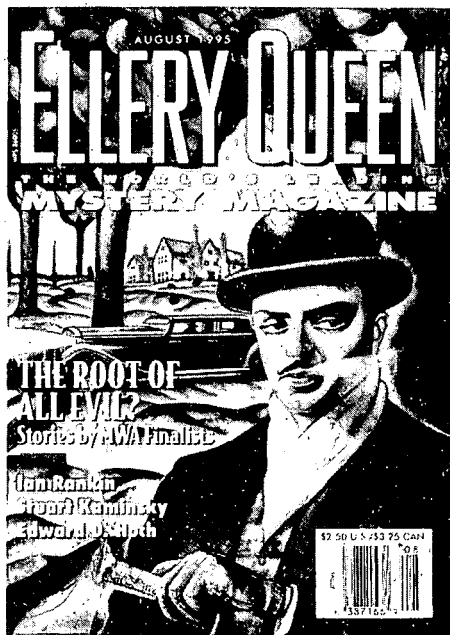
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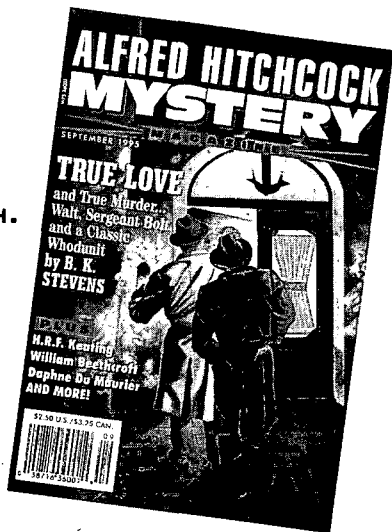
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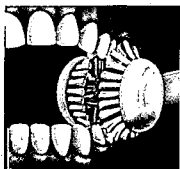
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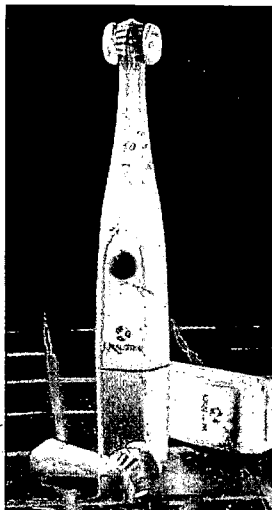
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